DOCTOR WHO
NOVELLAS

THE CABINET OF LIGHT

DANIEL O'MAHONY

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OF LIGHT

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FOREWORD by CHAZ BRENCHLEY

AT THE HEART OF ALL GOOD MYSTERY WRITING, PERHAPS AT THE HEART OF ALL GOOD

writing, beats a single driving theme, and thats identity. At the heart of all good mystery writing, perhaps at the heart of all good writing, beats a single driving theme, and thats subversion.

And already we have a paradox: two hearts that cannot possibly beat as one; and thats fine, because this is fiction were talking about, and in fiction actually they can. Famously, the Doctor has two hearts in any case but even if he didnt, or even where its only concerned with us simpler monocores, any story worth its salt dances to this double rhythm. You dont have to go to Bach in search of counterpoint; fiction too can be polyphonic, drawing its edge and its energy from the relentless opposition of equal voices.

At its simplest and least sophisticated, crime fiction has its mystery embodied in its own generic name: whodunit? This is the Agatha Christie end of the market, not so much a novel as a puzzle-book, a jigsaw in story form but still dealing with that fundamental question of identity as it sets out to unmask a murderer. The reader either leaps ahead of the detective or is left running to catch up, demanding an explanation at the end with all the clues laid out for examination; either way it doesnt matter, the chase is the point of it, the hunt is all that counts. Its a ritual, an embodiment of tradition, a reassurance: all

will be well, and the world can be put back together just as it was, save for these missing pieces.

More subtly, more darkly, the private eye novel is really more concerned with the identity of its hero. We read Chandler to find out about Philip Marlowe which is where the subversion starts, but by no means where it ends. Were offered the standard coin of crime, drugs and vice and corruption, but we find ourselves more interested in the narrator than in the story he tells; and all the time the way he tells that story, the language and the rhythms of his voice, act as another counterpoint to the plot. The words flow like a river, like a fugue (never forgetting that fugue has another meaning too, as a psychological state, an amnesiacs flight from reality: just ask the girl in pink pyjamas about that, as she opens this story) and, like a fugue, like a river, the glittering surface hides undercurrents that undercut the solid bank we think we stand on. Nothing is or ever can be that solid, in Marlowes world; trust all your weight to something or to someone and you will fall through.

In an essay published in 1950, Chandler said of that world, Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean. Daniel OMahony borrows that same line here, in The Cabinet of Light; its an affirmation that to be frank is not really necessary, but it is peculiarly apt. The storys geography may be transposed from the neon spangle of Los Angeles to the physical and psychological ruin of post-war London, the milieu may be transposed from gangsterdom to that borderland where science meets magic, from Mr Big to Doctor Who, but were still treading the same fictional territory here, were still talking about mystery and subversion. And were still discussing them in the same rich language, still laying traps for the unwary and playing word-games for the aficionado.

Goya said that the sleep of reason brings forth monsters. Lechasseurs dreams do the same, were told so very early; and thats appropriate, thats the message here, that Lechasseur (the hunter, of course) is the voice of reason, hes a rational man. But hes loose in a world that lacks rationality; even the Doctor makes better sense in this monstrous post-apocalyptic landscape than our human hero. Lechasseur isnt even comfortably at home in his own body or his life, afflicted by visions and premonitions, curiously healed from a disabling injury, seeking constantly to remake himself from soldier to spiv to investigator. The traditional hunter, the private eye figure, is always and necessarily an outsider, an observer, a stranger in a strange land; here thats taken to extremes, making Lechasseur the true alien in this story, for all the Doctors two hearts and inherent transience.

Two hearts make for double jeopardy, and its always seemed to me that we ask a great deal of our writers, a double achievement: clarity of thought and clarity of language, a strong instinct for the story and another for the music, the voice of a poet and a mind like a steel trap. OMahony doesnt disappoint, on either side. Id have stayed with him for the story, simply to find out what happened; Id have followed him for the telling of it, simply to hear more and never mind its meaning.

But thats too clumsy a distinction, for the delicate transactions of English prose; you cant truly shave one from the other. How can we know the dancer from the dance?

We only know when one of them is stumbling, and neither one does here, bound up as tight as they are in each other and in the structure of the piece, which is the third part of the divided whole. A novella is a hard thing to shape, too baggy for a short story and far too constraining for a novel; all too easy to let any sense of structure slip. And to cheat, perhaps, to fall back on lazy practice, perhaps to haul in a deus ex machina at the end why not, when youve been gifted with the perfect excuse, a very literal god-in-a-box, the Doctor with his TARDIS at his back? Not here. That perhaps is the final subversion, that the ending is its own business, irresolute and compelling, depending neither on the Doctor nor on the hero-figure Lechasseur forcing a solution to the mystery. It would be unfair to say more, as there are some traditions we must still observe, but its tight, its true and it is entirely unexpected.

George Pelecanos writes some of the most interesting crime thrillers coming out of America at the moment; he has said that all his work is about what it means to be a man (with the subtext in contemporary urban US society understood). Perhaps its not too flippant to suggest that all Doctor Who fiction is about what it means to be a Time Lord. The understood subtext is that it is written by humans, and actually we havent yet figured out quite what it means to be us. The title itself poses a question of identity, and in so far as it has an answer at all, it has always shifted with the seasons. In the end, what it comes back to is the mystery. Welcome to The Cabinet of Light. Anyone got the key?

Chaz Brenchley, October 2002

PROLOGUE: NIGHT AND FOG

IT WAS A TYPICAL EAST END FOG; IT WASNT WHITE.

Like all true Londoners, and despite what he saw at the flicks, Cranfield knew the fog was green. It was a damp, tubercular, reassuring shade. For years the night sky had glowed livid pink, shot through with dust and flame, though that was fading now.

With time the tiny clumps of black or red flowers that bloomed on the rubble would die out. Cranfield was a young man, he hoped to be pounding this beat twenty, thirty years on. His father had walked these streets when the first tentative bombs fell; his great-uncle had hunted the Ripper and the Limehouse Phantom nearby; he was walking in their footsteps and in the labyrinth of fogs he could almost believe their paths would cross, three generations of policemen at the same crossroads.

There came the peal of a bell from Shoreditch, hairs prickled on the back of his neck, a memory of sirens and all-clear whistles and the chime calling all hands to help pull bodies from the river.

His beat took him past Spitalfields Market, which was shut up for the night though the gate still thronged with people. The church opposite attracted them like doodlebugs. It was bone-white, yellowed with neglect then scorched black by a Luftwaffe handprint that might not fade for generations. To one side there was a scrub of grass where vagrants slept under newsprint blankets, though Cranfield couldnt imagine the dreams the church would give them. By day, when the streets filled with human heat, old women would sit on the steps beneath the angular spire and suck green oranges and spit the pips onto the street to mock austerity. Cranfield felt great sympathy for them, the living public. By night the stones absorbed all the heat and people stayed huddled round pub doorways till closing time, then at the market gate. Ragged around the gate were the dark façades of houses, pitted with gaps where other homes had stood until, one night, they had been transformed into cairns of brick rubble and human pulp.

Outside the market a woman was singing, a broken voice, eerily Cranfield couldnt see where it was coming from. They were mainly women here, in their clusters. Vagrants stood shivering by a fire on the scrub. A dirt-faced boy ran in the street, grinning, clipped past Cranfield and the policeman instinctively felt like lashing out, but checked himself. There was a woman squatting on the steps, older than she looked, wrapped in a dark shawl but bare-headed; she sold flowers by day and had a flowers name but he couldnt place it right

now. There was an old soldier beside her, tall and heavy in his black cap and coat; he turned to look at Cranfield with a long dead slab-face that probably hadnt twitched since 1918. Cranfield tipped the rim of his hat and nodded automatically, but the eye that watched him was white and sightless.

He moved through them, watching them bristle as he passed. Overhead was a shiny bombers moon; they could all feel it, despite the fog. There was a patch of darkness on the far side of the church. The girl came stumbling out of that, a splash of violent pink in the midst of green. Cranfield wasnt the first to see her, it was the commotion that made him turn, but he was the closest and when she lost her footing he was there to catch her.

A few days later he would barely remember what she looked like. There was just the memory of her as she shambled towards him, taking each step as though it were her first, wearing nothing but a baggy pink pair of pyjamas. Not silk, not cotton, not even nylon, just pink and shiny in the moonlight. She was barefoot, her feet were blue. The pink pyjamas hung crumpled on her wiry frame. She was small enough for Cranfield to mistake her for a child, though once he got close he realised she was probably in her twenties. She was a skinny pale thing, she shivered in the autumn fog, but she looked hurt rather than cold. Her eyes told him that they had a grey traumatised sheen, witness-eyes. He could tell, just by looking, that her grasp on the everyday had been ripped away, and savagely.

It had been over four years since Cranfield held anyone like this. Then it had been a girl no older than twelve, and he cradled her in his arms as the life left her body.

You heard stories of Blitz miracles all the time, unlikely survivors, but he had never seen one with his own eyes. This woman wasnt going to die. Her stare leapt wildly round the faces of the gathered crowd. He could feel delicate bones through her pyjamas.

Whats happened to you? he asked. She was smiling. He tried a more basic approach: Whats your name?

I dont remember, she said. What year is this? I dont remember the year. Someone mumbled it, embarrassed. The girl nodded and grinned. It was hard to tell if she understood the date. Cranfield thought shell-shock, though that made no sense. She had a Blitz-twitch. There were no signs of violence on her face, on her clothes.

I dont know who I am. Her eyes opened wider and she grabbed his uniform frantically. Police… she said, and again he knew she was a victim.

Are you hurt? I remember light, she insisted. I was going to die! There was so much light.

She held open palms out for Cranfield to inspect, as if shed been clutching the light in them, but her hands were just dark, bruised pink. A chill rippled through him anyway. Someone else was kneeling beside him, the flower-seller, holding out a worn out bloom, so blackened it was impossible to tell what it had ever been. The girl took it mutely, keeping her mouth tight shut as if holding back a scream.

Then her eyes closed and her head lolled back but she was only asleep.

The girl in pink pyjamas. The police never found a name for her and the press didnt need one. She became a celebrity and her fame spread wide, though not far beyond London. Briefly, she captured the public imagination all the melodramatic ingredients were there, the pretty girl, the sinister East End setting, a crime so terrible she had wiped it from her mind, even the pink pyjamas added a frisson that helped sell papers.

The girl in pink pyjamas. She was a distraction for dangerous times. She took up the front pages and kept the frightening business of the day folded within. You could look at her photograph and forget rationing and devaluation, Pakistan and Palestine, airlifts and fuel crises, China and Germany, the FBI and the MGB, and the silent dustclouds rising over Kazakhstan. She always looked damaged in the photographs, the authentic face of 1949. So, she was pinned through the middle of the twentieth century. All of London knew who she was, even if she didnt.

The girl in pink pyjamas. Eventually her celebrity waned and she was gradually forgotten. After a few days, once the novelty had worn off and the police had turned up no new leads, she began to vanish from the newspapers. By then, she had come to the attention of the Doctor.

But perhaps he already knew.

1: THE CITY OF EXILES

EACH MORNING AFTER MIDNIGHT, A WOMAN STOOD IN THE STREET BENEATH HONORÉ

Lechasseurs window and screamed abuse at the bloody bastard Irish who had taken her son away. That was several wars ago but, sitting alone in the dark, Lechasseur could see the bullet going through her dead sons skull.

Lechasseur rarely slept but spent his nights drinking, whiskey, sometimes vodka. Hed lost the capacity to get drunk in 1944 and took alcohol as an anaesthetic. His dreams brought forth monsters, they always had done, but London seemed to amplify them.

Cheap whiskey was easy to find for someone with the right contacts, though Lechasseur was beginning to suspect that his were wrong. Recently hed taken a consignment of meat from a reliable source. It had been a bad deal. The meat was rancid, almost green, crawling with maggots.

He had wrapped a slab of the rotten meat in newspaper. The paper carried a report and a picture of a pretty, dazed-looking woman posing uneasily in light grey pyjamas. The image caught his eye, as sometimes important things would, but he decided it was just a sympathetic reaction. She looked out of place, another exile in London. The grainy picture rubbed off on his hands.

Rationing would last a little longer. After that the future was up for grabs.

He dreamed of the future sometimes, of a hybrid London whose familiar skyline had been fused with towers of glass and steel. He sat cross-legged on his bed dreaming with his eyes open. Hed had vivid dreams as a boy once he twitched and fitted on a street corner while in his mind he was out on the bayou, fighting a muck-encrusted gold-eyed swamp monster. That was rare, nothing to worry the conscription board. Then he was blasted through a Belgian farmhouse window and the dreams became sharper.

Sometimes they came true and sometimes they didnt.

That morning he had managed to sleep a little and have ordinary dreams and the first thing he said to himself when he woke was doctor but he didnt take it to mean anything.

Around him his apartment was spartan and undecorated. He liked the clean bareness of the room, the raw plaster walls, the exposed plumbing, the pale brown wood of the floorboards. Sometimes he was forced to stow contraband here, most recently silk underwear and Russian cigarettes. Hed piled them in a corner but still bristled at the clutter they represented. The most important things he carried in his head. He let few people in. This was his private space.

He washed and dressed and inspected himself in the bathroom mirror. Hed let his hair grow since the army neatly and down to his shoulders, and was cultivating a thin black beard and moustache. The black was shot through with premature lines of grey.

He was already a distinctive figure in this neighbourhood, a colourful exotic with a slow charismatic smile and coffee dark skin. There were disadvantages but sometimes it helped to be hidden in plain sight.

His reflection stared back at him, hypnotically. He had prominent eyes, icy-white with deep brown pupils. He practised a rogues grin, he practised a big confident stare. He brushed his teeth mouthing phrases in a bad English accent. Splendid. I beg your pardon. Good show. His mouth was a slash on his face, frothing with smuggled American toothpaste. He never slept but he always felt good in the mornings.

Something in the unrationed daylight of London made him feel free.

The one thing Lechasseur knew he would never adjust to was the winter. It was always so cold here even in summer the temperature couldnt touch the coldest New Orleans day. He pulled on his black leather winter coat before leaving. Hed also taken to wearing a hat, not so much because of the cold but because it kept the dreams trapped in his head.

You look like a gangster, he told the reflection. Hed been moved to England in 1943, posted to a foreign land where everyone from the lowliest private to the highest-ranking Blimp believed that all America was Chicago and Al Capone was her honorary president.

After the war, hed decided that was true.

I like being a gangster. I like being an American in London.

In 1944 hed been told he would never walk again. He bounded out of the room and ran down the stairs. His landlady was standing halfway down, old Mrs Bag-of-Bones, with her knitted shawl and her patient smile that she wore only for the strange polite black foreign gentleman in her attic. He caught the banisters, set them creaking, before he could bowl into her.

Good morning, Mr L. Youre full of beans today. Like so many Londoners, his landlady couldnt quite get her tongue round his name, so he became Mr L. It all added to the lustre. I always am, he said, as he edged past. And Ive got an appointment. She called after him: There were men asking after you again last night.

I told them you werent here.

Were they police? he asked, not turning.

I shouldnt think so. They were very rough men. Ugly with big hands.

Ah, you had me worried there. They sound like old friends, he said, mainly to assuage her fears. He knew a great many ugly men with big hands but he liked to keep them away from his home. Sometimes he felt a wanderlust and imagined a life half on the run, sleeping where and when he could, but the simple pleasure of having a fixed place of his own always outweighed that.

Besides, he liked Mrs Bag-of-Bones. On quiet evenings theyd talk together in her kitchen, exchanging war stories while she taught him how to enjoy tea. Shed lost a son in the Spanish Civil War. Like so many she was followed wherever she went by the faceless dead. London was haunted, she masked her eyes with pebble-thick glasses to avoid seeing them.

If he was troubled by the thought of night visitors, Lechasseur felt happier once hed got out into the bitter air and onto his bike. He travelled everywhere he could by bicycle. He felt more connected with his surroundings than he would in an automobile and it was exhilarating to feel the rhythm of his legs as he pedalled.

After the blast had shredded his spine hed had to re-learn the art of walking. It had come to him surprisingly quickly and he always felt that hed somehow embarrassed the US Army by trumping their predictions.

It was a ten minute ride to the café but he was held up at a checkpoint. It had been raised overnight in a once-narrow road that

had been widened by the Luftwaffe eight years earlier, whole rows of solid planted houses gouged out of the ground. Hed ventured down into a bombsite once, like an archaeologist or a grave-robber. The dust from the blast still seemed to hang in the air, dull and unmagical.

Uniformed coppers manned the checkpoint and you could never tell with them. They were too often intimidated by his height, his colour and most of all his accent. He asked politely what was going on. Last night a boy had found a UXB while playing and cradled it in the dark, crying softly until dawn when a rescue party found him. The army were defusing it and Lechasseur was redirected with a warning. London was tense. Thered been reports of explosions around the East End a few nights earlier but there was no trace by the morning. It was as if the city were refighting the war in its memories, phantom bombs and dream murders. Lechasseur had always felt sensitive to these things.

He locked up his bike outside the café, a place he knew well, though it was the other party who suggested they meet there. Hed heard of her through a mutual contact. He knew nothing about her. He knew her at once, sitting alone in the corner, watching the door with fidgety nervous eyes. He felt warier than before but walked over to hover at the table.

She looked up.

Monsieur Layshazoor? she asked.

He pulled the spare chair back in an easy motion and sat down to face her. Just Mister, he said, smiling leisurely to show her white teeth. Im not French. Its just a name. I dont have a drop of French blood in my veins.

Did I pronounce it right?

Close, he told her, still smiling. A greasy boy came to the table and Lechasseur ordered coffee and breakfast. The woman had started without him, half-eaten bacon, eggs, fried bread swam in grease on her plate, the cutlery askew across it. Next to that was an ashtray with three cigarette stubs pressed into it. She had a fourth between her lips. Her hands, long and delicate with painted red nails, rubbed against each other on the wood tabletop. Lechasseur put his hands opposite hers and kept them still. He looked at her.

You must be Mrs Blandish, he said.

She slow-blinked. Yes. Emily Blandish. She rolled the name round her tongue. She had an elegant mouth and she knew just how much lipstick to apply to bring out the red. She was, Lechasseur decided once hed sat down, very raw and attractive. She had big baby blue eyes and healthy white skin. There was a heavy line in the bones of her face, of her shoulders, but she knew how to work with that. She wore a short-sleeved dress that exposed prettily freckled shoulders and the soft flesh of her neck. She had bleach-blonde hair, wavy but faded like a photograph. It didnt matter, it was a tight frame for a pretty face. She was seated but he could tell she was quite tall.

He wanted her to stand so he could see her height, the shape of her back, the seam down her stockings.

He pursed his lips and blew silently. That made her nervous.

It was strange, he decided, that she could make herself look so confident yet also so shy. She looked slumped and uneasy. She sensed that, stubbing out her cigarette and shifting in her seat, ready to set out her proposal.

Do you smoke? Emily Blandish asked.

No, thanks.

Sometimes I see cigarette smoke as yellow liquid poison on the air. You dont want me to tell you that.

So, she said, after a pause. Youre American. You noticed, he replied. He realised he was trying to flirt. I was in America before the war. I was an actress then… well, a

dancer, to be honest. Danced Broadway, vaudeville, hoofed round the States trying to get to Hollywood. I never did. Shed relaxed, she smiled. Lechasseur studied her face carefully and decided that this was probably true. There was a brassy, troupers edge in her voice, try as she might to sound like Celia Johnson. Maybe thats why this felt wrong like too many Brits she was hung up with class and respectability.

She was trying to impress him.

So where are you from? I cant place your accent.

Louisiana. New Orleans.

She shook her head. That doesnt sound right. I was in New Orleans for a month, I know the accent. Yours is different. I hope you dont mind me saying.

Ive been over here since 1943. Ten years from now Ill sound like the Home Service.

And no, I dont mind you saying.

She smiled again with a real curl on her lips. She ordered more coffee from the greasy boy and hugged it when it came. The coffee was good here, it was probably from cheap beans Lechasseur had supplied himself and hed never bilked anyone. Mrs Blandish stared at him over the rim of the mug. She was mellow-eyed. Mrs Blandish

he looked at her bare fingers, no wedding band.

Ive never met a proper spiv before. She was lying and wanted him to know it. He tried to look offended.

I prefer to be called a fixer, he explained. Imagine theres a line and on one side there is everything legal and on the other everything is illegal. I like to walk along the line. Either side, it doesnt matter, so long as I stick close by it. Dont go wandering off, he added faintly.

It occurred to him that she might be working for the police, but if she was hed know and hed never been guarded in his conversation.

She lit another cigarette and sat with it crooked in her fingers, watching him play with his food. He ate slowly, the breakfast was heavy and hard to swallow. He wondered what was going on in her head. Then she said: I dont want the police involved in my business.

So, this is something on the wrong side of the line? Their mutual contact, a man called Mace, hadnt told him what Mrs Blandish wanted. It was likely shed kept him in the dark as well. That was what intrigued Lechasseur, her wilful mystery. Even as he spoke, Emilys face stiffened, her lips tightening, the flirty eyes flicking away.

She doesnt want to talk about this.

No, nothing illegal. She shook her head and the reluctant moment passed, she was smiling again. Its only that Im a very private person. I need someone who knows how to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Im not exactly inconspicuous.

No, but I hear youre discreet. When I spoke to Mr Mace I asked for you specifically. You were recommended. She didnt add to that.

He said: Im flattered.

Theres another problem this is murky. If you do this for me it might turn up all sorts of things. The police, I believe, wouldnt be able to deal with it, not properly.

It still wasnt the whole truth but he nodded. Discretion, shed said. He was full of questions but knew better than to ask them now. He hadnt finished his breakfast but he pushed the plate away. Their hands were folded opposite each other on the table.

She tapped her fingers on the surface, maybe nervous, maybe excited. She brushed the back of his hand and fixed him a glare, as if shed only now decided to tell him.

I want you to find my husband, she said, briskly. Hes disappeared.

When?

About a week ago. That was odd too vague but he let it pass.

Disappeared?

I think hes still in London. He has some… unusual friends. They may have hurt him or be holding him.

Unusual? Criminal?

No, eccentric. The sort of people who live underground, afraid of the light. I think they have him. Id like you to ask around among the people you know, see if theyve heard anything.

So, Id get to be some kind of detective?

She smiled at him, lazily and full-lipped. The brisk spark of the conversation discharged, she looked lulled and relaxed again, as though shed got the unpleasant detail out of the way. She was lying or at least withholding something but he couldnt see why. Youd be a good detective, she said. You look very sensitive, you know. Not like most men, or most soldiers anyway. Most of the Americans Ive met are very brash people. Very loud.

Ive always been one of the quiet ones, he admitted.

You look like a detective. Couldve stepped off a cinema screen. Except youre

she waved her hand in front of her face and had the decency to look embarrassed.

I dont see detective pictures. Theyre too violent for me.

She laughed, a big aggressive noise that came in bursts. She really was afraid of him.

I always wanted to be in pictures, she murmured.

Ill need a description of your husband. Whats his name?

Her lips twitched silently, then she said, The Doctor.

Lechasseur made a mental note. Doctor… Blandish?

She shook her head, paused again, then: No. Blandish is… My name is Blandish. Hes just the Doctor. I cant go looking for someone called just the Doctor. Thats how theyll know him. They wouldnt use his name. The Doctor.

And that was it, that was the moment when he realised he was going to accept the job.

The oddness of her request excited him, that and the gaps she was leaving in her story and the unaffectionate way she spoke of her nameless husband. There was no love in her face when she mentioned him, maybe even a hint of disdain, and he liked that.

Lechasseur knew that she was drawing him in with an enigma, but whatever else he sensed from her, he got the impression that she liked him and held no malice for him.

He named his terms and she surprised him by agreeing. Its his money, she said, with a shrug.

Plus expenses.

Plus reasonable expenses.

Here I was, hoping to get that car I always wanted.

Spontaneous concern: Do you carry a gun?

Not since I was in the army.

But you know how to use one? When he nodded she looked relieved.

It could get dangerous for you. In fact, I know it will.

He gazed deep and serious at the mask of her face. Most women would have turned away but she just trembled and let him see what he could, let him read her. He tried to make the words that would explain what the war had done to him but they wouldnt come and he clicked his lips impotently.

Emily fished around in her bag and hooked out an envelope, creamy-white with an elegant watermark. This, she said as she pushed it across the table, contained a Ł30

advance on his services, an address in London where she could be contacted and a description of her husband. Lechasseur weighed it in his hand, it was heavier than he expected and he could feel a hard metal outline under his fingers. He reached inside and drew out a chain, a large smooth silver key hung on the end. The metal shimmered against his skin, the world seemed suddenly harsher and brighter as it did in his waking dreams.

That belongs to him, Emily explained. If you find someone claiming to be the Doctor, this is the test. Youll know him and hell know you.

He must have looked perplexed, as she added: Are you happy?

Yeah, but this is all crazy, he confessed.

Isnt it just? She rose and brushed his hand a tentative shake before walking out.

He spent the next minute just sitting and breathing. He didnt check the envelope until she was long gone and immediately regretted it. One thing was missing, the description of her husband, the Doctor. Her address, at least, looked genuine. Hed been right, it was crazy, the whole thing was a wild goose chase, set up for reasons he couldnt begin to guess. Then there was the key, a mystery that still fizzed in his palm, and the blank anonymity of the Doctor himself. In a city of millions of souls he was going to be the hardest man or the easiest in

the world to find.

Around him the café hummed with electric light but it was only just keeping the grime at bay. New Orleans, he remembered, was a city of murk and humid shadows. Londons equivalent was dust with a cold gritty texture. In front of him were two grease-smeared plates, several half empty mugs, an ashtray and dark stains where coffee had once spilled. He added a scattering of coins. Then he set out to find the Doctor.

The search turned up nothing and put Lechasseur in a melancholy mood. He had contacts in the black market, the organised underworld and on the streets but no one admitted knowing the Doctor. He spoke to Emily once during that time, by telephone, to keep her updated on his stalled progress. She wished him good luck and he went on.

Even as a boy hed been introspective. His failure to turn up anything didnt depress him so much as it exhausted him. With every blank drawn the pointlessness of his search became more apparent. The Doctor the title was too vague, despite what his wife might say. Either it meant nothing at all or it meant too much. It meant a certain respectable GP with a drug habit; or a backstreet man who dug out unwanted bullets or unwanted babies for the right price; or a fabled mobster from Prohibition Chicago; or a man whod hanged three years earlier for poisoning no less than thirteen of his wives. He was a ships cook or the greatest professor of gambling the world had ever seen. Lechasseur used the name Blandish as little as possible, but even that drew a frustrating blank.

The cosh gangs hadnt heard of him, the slick-haired youths who called themselves the Dead Rabbits or the Cable Street Boys and wanted nothing more than to be as pretty and thuggish as Richard Attenborough and Dirk Bogarde. They practised their evil smiles on him but were surprisingly respectful. He found himself talking to pimps and policemen alike who stood, blank-faced and open-palmed and gave him nothing useful.

He patrolled the docks and climbed down on the Thames mud banks but the riverside people told him nothing. Those were the first few days and he began to lose hope.

Yet sometimes the city seemed to be alive with word of the Doctor. Lechasseur found himself cycling through the canyon-deep streets north of Tower Bridge and seemed to hear the echo Doctor Doctor Doctor bounce off the sheer walls around him.

Failure wore him down. He went without hope to G. Symes antiquarian bookshop on Charing Cross Road. Syme collected incunabula. He was an unlikely contact but good company. He didnt talk about his past, not to Lechasseur, but word was that hed been an undercover agent for the British since before the First World War. He didnt look like a spy, which was the giveaway.

Symes companion answered the door. Lechasseur didnt know his name but he was a good fifty years Symes junior, skinny and carrot-haired with a junkies pinpoint eyes. He giggled when he saw Lechasseur but was collected enough to beckon him into the flat.

He wore a red silk kimono unfastened at the front to reveal a pasty hairless chest.

Honoré! Syme declaimed, familiar as ever. He stood against a wall of books in his study, a searing red hearth before him casting expressionist shadows around the room.

Unlike his companion, Syme always overdressed, leaving a trail of colour, silk and velvet, through a world that had grown too drab for him. Hed draped a cloak over his tweeds, he was gaunt enough but too ruddy and cheerful to be Dracula. He probably thought it was still Halloween.

Symes companion, realising the evening was going to be full of talk, complained of a headache and went to lie down, so Syme was moved to make tea himself. Lechasseur sat still in one of the big leather armchairs, trying to read the spines of the books but finding most too faded to be legible. Syme always served tea bitter and brown with a slice of drowned lemon, in small bone china mugs that came with chips and cracks courtesy of Mr Goering of deplorable memory: Syme was bitter about the war, confided that hed been posting ominous reports on Hitler to the FO since 1923, to no avail.

I thought of putting a bullet in the little bastard myself, he said, then they banged him up and I thought thats his lot. He grimaced, then settled back in his chair. So how can I help you?

Lechasseur explained a little of his new job and watched first as a frown then as a crease of amusement crossed Symes lean sardonic face.

He put down his tea and clapped. The Doctor, you say? Thats wonderful!

Lechasseur leaned forward. Syme pinched his lips and whispered: Hes a hobgoblin.

Sorry?

Oh, Honoré, someones having fun with you. At least he had the grace to look sympathetic. Hes a mischief, a leprechaun, a boojum. The Doctor is a myth. Hes straight out of Old English folklore, typical trickster figure really. Dear me, youve gone white.

Lechasseur clicked his tongue irritably. I dont know about that, but theres a real flesh-and-blood man out there called the Doctor, who isnt from a fairytale. Thats who I need to find.

Syme gave him a baffling smile. Youre right about Mrs Blandish. She isnt giving you the whole story. You know youre the second person whos come to me this week asking about the Doctor and my last caller seemed to think that the flesh-and-blood man and the hobgoblin are one and the same. Let me show you something.

He pulled out of the chair before Lechasseur could ask about the last caller. He clutched his lapels, chuckling faintly while casting round the room, before snatching a heavy leather book from the nearest table. This is what I showed him. Youll like this, he said, crouching by Lechasseurs chair to display the open pages. They were covered with photographs, interspersed by text. In the pictures, turned grey by the camera but perhaps once vibrant and colourful, were prehistoric daubings on a smooth stone wall.

These are pictures from the Altamira grotto in Spain, Syme explained, hard-voiced now, all drollery gone. Its a narrative interpretation of the sequence. All very speculative but all very intriguing as well. His hands went across the page, tapping each picture in turn.

This is a record of a tribe living in Spain or possibly North Africa at the time of the last Ice Age. Human society is basically matriarchal and cave-dwelling, what Engels calls crude communism. The story begins.

Its the long winter. The tribes worship Orb, the moon. The old cave mother is dead and her daughter is the new leader. No names, they wouldnt have had anything like language back then. The new leader is weak because they have no fire. The tribe faces extinction.

A stranger comes, a powerful outcast from another tribe. She challenges the leader.

The elders decide to give the healthy young men, breeding stock, to the newcomer. The leader is seen to be weak because she allows her useless father to live. The old father fears fire see that hes basically a reactionary figure, thats important.

Theres a power struggle within the tribe and they call on Orb to intervene. Orb sends her messengers who bring the secret of fire. They represent cosmic principles, but look at this figure, the one with the crown of flame. He looks like the old father.

The old man-messenger brings fire and also reason. The stranger kills to protect her privileges the messenger exposes her not just as a killer but, as this image seems to say, a liar. Dissemblance, such a radical concept for these people! The old man brings not just fire but new ideas.

Fire and these new ideas change the way the society operates, the power of the cave-mothers is eroded, the hunters the men, become powerful. And the messenger is an old man, who is shown to be not feeble or reactionary. He introduces the male principle. The matriarchy is overthrown. History begins.

And the old man messenger…?

… is the Doctor. Syme slammed the book shut. An early appearance.

Youre saying Ive been hired to track down the Loch Ness Monster.

Syme sat, still clutching the book to his chest. Im saying the Doctor is a personification of the engine of history. He crops up everywhere on Earth, never looks the same twice, likes to hang round London though, Lord knows why, its the midden of the cosmos. Hes like a gremlin, hes someone we can pin the bad things on.

Who burned London in 1666? Who kidnapped the crew of the Mary Celeste? Who built Stonehenge with his bare hands? The Doctor, the Doctor, the Doctor.

My client thinks hes real and hes married to her.

This Emily person, whatever nuthouse shes escaped from… shes paying you by the day, isnt she? I say good luck to her. I dont see you have a problem.

In the bedroom, the young man in the kimono was screaming, probably seeing withdrawal-syndrome monsters coming through the

walls. Syme flicked an irritated glance in his direction but a glaze of concern appeared on his eyes. The moment had become awkward, Lechasseur set down his tea and stood.

It could all be coincidence, he said. There really is a Doctor, a real man.

Symes attention had wavered but suddenly it was back on Lechasseur, measured and calm. I dont think so but as I say, you arent the only one whos looking for the Doctor in London right now. He paused thoughtfully. My last caller works for a man called Eric Walken. I did some checking. Walken runs a club in the West End. Hes a cheap conjuror but imagines hes a bit more than that. I can get you the address.

Lechasseur nodded his thanks. Walken… English?

He says hes Dutch. He lies. I dont know too much.

Syme searched through his desk silently, ignoring the moans from the bedroom. He passed Lechasseur a small, smartly printed business card.

This club has a bad reputation, Syme warned. The clientele are… well, they fought in the war, their side lost. It could be dangerous for you.

Emily told me that, Lechasseur mused, turning the card round in his fingers before pocketing it. Ive killed, do you know? Ive killed men.

Syme shrugged. These days, who hasnt? But he was turning again to the bedroom and the screams of his companion. Lechasseur let himself out, into the dark and the hateful cold of the English autumn.

2: A DAY AT THE INFERNO

THE MAGICIAN RAISED HIS ARMS IN FRONT OF HIM AND OVERHEAD, GESTURING FOR

quiet. His hands were almost the only exposed parts of his body and blood oozed off them, down his wrists, to stain his cuffs. It was blood or bile, hard to tell. Under the harsh red light and from a distance, it looked black.

Now, he intoned, for the final and most fundamental miracle.

He clipped his words, pronouncing each one as though it was precious and serious. He used a precise English accent, suggesting someone who had taken to it as a second language. Sometimes he whispered but his voice would still carry through the club.

Moments earlier, he had performed magic on his young assistant. He had locked her in a narrow cabinet then driven a lattice of swords through its thin walls and her body.

When hed opened the box, shed tumbled out, bleeding from her many wounds. Now she curled motionless at his feet, shrouded by her robe. A bare, limp arm stretched out from under the cloth, twitching on the bare stage.

For Eric Walken, the conjuror, this was all part of the act.

He turned his soaking palms inwards, then creased the shape of his wrists so that he seemed to be holding an invisible chalice up to the light. Stage gunpowder sneezed and when the smoke cleared his hands were no longer empty. A modest swastika hung in the air between his fingers. There was scattered applause from the audience, which grew ferocious when the swastika began to rotate, its spokes turning anticlockwise.

As it turned it glowed. The audience thumped their tables approvingly, cheering the symbol more than the magic. It was a thin crowd this evening, their noise didnt amount to much.

The magician stepped back and lowered his hands but the swastika hung in place, turning faster and glowing more brightly, until the

stage and the club was bathed gold. The dark gooey patches on the magicians hands were deep crimson. Lechasseur took advantage of the prestige-light to get a better look at his surroundings.

He had arrived at Covent Garden in mid-afternoon, which meant that the sun was already squeezing down on the horizon and the sky was suddenly full of darkness and soot. Hed taken Symes warning seriously and made some enquiries about the Inferno club during the morning. The word from both sides of the street was that the Inferno catered for misty-eyed nostalgic blackshirts, sad old men who liked to parade round in their evil fancy-dress so long as no one was watching. The new young hard-eyed hardcore fascist wasnt a regular here, it was too weird for him. Walken had studied Nazism in Berlin in the 1920s under the occultist Hanussen. The police thought he was a harmless eccentric, though more than once Lechasseur heard the suggestion that only serious bribery or serious blackmail was keeping him safe from raids and vigilante attacks.

Walken performed magic on stage at the club, though only as a matinee so Lechasseur reasoned that he wasnt popular or had better things to do by night. The bill suggested the evenings act was a cabaret, singing and dancing and bare flesh. From the outside the Inferno looked more pathetic than dangerous and Lechasseur was disappointed that the Doctor might be found here. Over the days of his investigation, Lechasseur had built up a certain respect for his quarry. He was tenaciously elusive, that was the only thing he really knew about the man.

The Inferno was seedy. It seemed to close off the potential of whom the Doctor could be. It had a narrow, grimy brick façade, shuttered behind a locked metal gate.

Lechasseur scouted round the back and found a supply entrance protected by a low wall. Grey lifeless windows looked down on him. He resolved to go in through the front first, though it took a hard breath and a shot of whiskey before he could face that.

Lechasseur had a smile that went right through the skin and into the soul. He got by on charm, politeness and novelty. The darkness of his skin and the Louisiana in his voice werent impediments though they were never unalloyed blessings. He also had a whispered reputation as a war hero though he couldnt remember doing anything better or braver than the next soldier. So, he did not have a difficult time but even so there were men and women in London who found it easy to hate and the Inferno club promised to be full of them.

He was not refused a ticket, perhaps the clerk couldnt see him through the dirt smeared on the glass booth. When he got inside, once his eyes had adjusted to the annihilating redness, he found the club nearly deserted. Even after the sudden influx of young men towards the end of the magic act, fewer than a third of the tables were occupied. The body of the club was below ground. There was a flight of steps down one of the walls, just inside the main door. Coming through hed got the impression of a cavern with smooth walls honed into angles but still retaining the lopsided and irregular shape of a natural cave. By swastika-light he saw he was mistaken, the walls were a deliberate collection of random angular shapes. They were decorated not with the expected memorabilia but jagged surrealist pictures of zigzagging landscapes, lopsided people and crooked houses. The stage was raised in the centre, tables ranged round it in no obvious pattern.

He sat alone. No one was looking at him. The red light made him invisible.

Walkens act began shortly after Lechasseur arrived and, judging from the low conversation coming from nearby tables, it held no-one elses attention; it wasnt until the magic swastika appeared that the crowd began to take notice. Only Lechasseur sat rapt throughout, but he had come to get a measure of Walken, not his act. There was something perversely fascinating about the show. It was designed to be cold and unengaging, it was performed without any of the flourishes or the humour he expected from a conjuror.

Walkens nameless assistant had introduced him and hed come on stage wearing a turban of wasps. Real wasps they exploded in a swarm from his head and were sucked away by hidden tubes, but a few escaped and meandered sluggishly round the club. It was bitterly cold and they were waiting to die. Lechasseur brushed one off his coat.

Walken was not a tall man and he had hidden himself in a black robe, worn over a tuxedo. Under the mass of wasps he had been wearing a cowl, which he did not lower, so it was impossible to judge the shape of his head. His face was part-hidden by a domino mask. He wrapped himself in layers. His tricks were mainly unremarkable but he was a good hypnotist.

Walken called a waitress onto the stage and, with a wave of his hand, convinced her that she loved his assistant passionately and she spent the rest of the act gazing lovingly up at the stage from a spare table. Walken hypnotised a volunteer into thinking he was a dog and, as an

encore, brought a dog on stage and hypnotised it into thinking it was a man. It tottered on two legs and tried to speak. While looking for his volunteer, Walkens eyes passed over Lechasseur, then moved on.

At the end, he created a swastika from thin air and set it spinning.

This, he declaimed, goading the suddenly, shamefully alert audience, this misunderstood symbol is our miracle. It is not a cross, it predates the Greek Christ.

This is the secret knowledge passed down to us from the Aryan people of the Indus.

This swastika is the great wheel of life.

Though a small man, he was strong. He scooped up the corpse of his assistant without effort and carried it back into the cabinet. He set it spinning again, in time with the turning of the swastika.

The wheel of life unturns death and time! Walken announced. The swastika brings forth a regeneration.

The swastika-light flared to fill the club and Lechasseur flinched, seeing a brief negative impression of the conjuror, dressed all in white, on the inside of his eyelids. When he opened his eyes, all was red again, except for a pale spotlight on the magic cabinet, which wobbled faintly. No one in the club breathed. Lechasseur wanted to look round for Walken, who had faded into the darkness, but his eyes were fixed on the box.

The magic box collapsed in on itself and the blonde woman was there unharmed in the middle, no longer in black but draped in a red, white, black swastika flag. She displayed bare and unwounded limbs to the clubgoers. Played perfectly, the crowd lurched to their feet, a violent ovation that lasted well over a minute despite the assistants squeaks for hush. The magic was over, the cabaret had begun.

Lechasseur saw the shadows ripple where Walken was making his getaway. He rose and slipped after him, into the back of the Inferno.

Behind the jagged unsettling walls the club was pokey and unremarkable. Walken slipped down whitewashed passageways and into an annexe. Lechasseur went after him, not furtively but still quiet enough not to be heard. At the front of the club, the audience were clapping politely as the flag-draped girl sang and danced.

Walken had his back to the door, running his hands under the tap at a washbasin. He didnt turn when he heard Lechasseur enter. He slipped off his robe and mask and hung them on a wallhook. Then he stood studying himself in a mirror, pulling at the flesh of his face before turning. He looked unexpectedly young, maybe only thirty. His hair was slicked back, a faintly old-fashioned look that made Lechasseur think at once of Weimar elegance and Walkens own hyperbole about turning back time, but beneath that he had an unmistakable Cockney street style, a tight rage in his eyes, a wiry thug-body, a sour lopsided smile.

Heil Hitler, Lechasseur said, leaning on the door frame, his arms folded.

Hitler was a Jew. Hitler and Himmler both. They were self-hating Jews. That explains a lot about what went wrong, dont you think? The words spilled out in his practised stage voice but then his accent turned pure North-of-the-River. Now get out of here.

Lechasseur was laconic, American. Im here on business. I hear youre looking for the Doctor. Walken balled his fists, looked ready to pounce. Get out or Ill call the police. Youd really call the police? To your club? With all that goes on here?

Walken grinned viciously at him. No one would care. This weeks enemy is Stalin.

Lechasseur thought that Walken would order him out a third time but instead the conjuror softened and said: What do you know about the Doctor? His tongue was moving visibly under the skin

of his mouth.

I know youre looking for him.

Walken stood still and suspicious for a second, then his face hardened. Get out, he said and the third time meant it was serious. Lechasseur nodded and turned away but Walken was talking again, reverting to his conjurors voice.

I worked for the British during the war. I used my magic against the Germans. I stood at the dawn of time where my spirit wrestled with the Führer in psychic combat.

I was a patriot.

Im sure you did your bit, Lechasseur agreed. Walken slid alongside him and offered him his hand.

I can see youre an educated man, he apologised. Perhaps next time we meet, we can start afresh.

Lechasseur shook the offered hand, and sensed a powerful hunger in the magicians grip.

It seemed a good idea to get out of the Inferno quickly. It took him less than five minutes to break back in. The evening dark offered him cover and once hed scaled the back wall no one could see him from the alley. The doors were locked but the least-cracked ground floor window wasnt and opened smoothly. Singing and cheering rose through the floor from the club below, the mood had turned rowdy since hed confronted Walken. The conjuror himself was probably still changing. Most cabaret nights he acted as MC, or simply held court at his table with his entourage and his mistresses to watch the show. Lechasseurs contacts said that Walken had simply watched too many gangster flicks but Lechasseur wondered if he wasnt modelling himself on the occult charlatans of Weimar Berlin. Many of them, he remembered, gave themselves titles like Doctor.

The ground floor was a nest of dirty grey passages and unsuspicious store rooms.

Lechasseur flitted from one to the next in the darkness, his eyes shining, listening carefully to the rhythm of the subterranean noise for any change. He took a narrow flight of steps up to the next storey, where the floorboards vanished under carpet and the bare walls were papered over. The first door he found was an office. The window offered a disheartening view of the back yard, nothing magical. Most of the drawers on the desk were locked, the others were empty or full of stationery. There was a folder on the top with a Shoreditch address inked neatly by the spine. He picked it open. Newspaper clippings, all the same subject but arranged chronologically with reportage giving way to filler, what the press called lifestyle pieces. He didnt recognise the photographs of the girl at first but she was familiar and a browse through the headlines and articles jogged his memory. She was the girl with amnesia theyd found in the East End, the girl in pink pyjamas. No explanation, no notes, nothing connecting her to the Doctor, but still he felt hed found a new line of enquiry.

According to the final item before the clippings ran out, she was staying at a guest house in Shoreditch, six months rent paid for by the

yellow press. Lechasseur replaced the file but made a note of the address.

There was another unlocked room on this storey and Walken was standing just inside.

Lechasseur caught his voice coming through the walls and checked himself before pushing at the door. He eased it open a crack and saw the black line of the magicians back.

I know, he was saying, I said wed take the girl tonight but things have changed.

Somethings come up. We can still shadow her.

Walken wasnt alone no, he moved his head to one side and Lechasseur caught sight of the telephone still there was someone else there. It was a big room and he sensed at least two others present. He caught sight of a stockingd leg and thought of Mrs Blandish but the woman leaned forward to kiss Walken on the cheek and it wasnt her. The room seemed big, a conference room with a curved, probably round table.

Then Walken said: I met the Doctor today and Lechasseur strained to hear more.

No, he came here… No, and Im not going to tell you where he is. I wouldnt be surprised if she can tap into the phones… Yes, but I recognised him… and, no, Im not sure, but anyone can be persuaded, even the Doctor, and Im an expert.

Then Walken turned and, without looking, pushed the door closed.

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Lechasseur cycled home, his head bloated with new information. He turned the pink pyjama girls address into a mnemonic, a little poem that he could visit tomorrow.

The rest of the clues he processed calmly: the amnesia case girl was implicated somehow and presumably she was the one Walken was planning to take, though not tonight at least; Walken had found the Doctor, or the Doctor had found him; Walken was holding this knowledge from someone; his relationship with the Doctor wasnt close, not yet…

… and, best of all, the Doctor is real.

So absorbed was he with all this information that hed cycled to his front door before spotting the two rough men ugly, with big hands waiting outside for him.

He ignored them at first but as he locked his bike away they strolled up behind him.

They were ugly at different ends of the spectrum, the first a squat mass whose face had been flattened by repeated pummelling, the tall second as crooked as any man pictured on the walls of the Inferno. They were the thin one and the fat one, the Laurel and the Hardy, and the Laurel had a Lüger in his big hands. The barrel pushed into the small of Lechasseurs back.

Lechasseur believed he had time to turn and knock the gun away but the Hardy was probably armed as well and since he recognised neither he expected they would at least pause to offer an explanation before shooting.

Dont cry out, dont say anything, thats our car there, were going for a ride and if you do as we say youll be back here unhurt by midnight, nod if you understand.

Lechasseur brought his head down and up, and on the up he saw the double-acts car at the kerbside. Silver Ghost. Whoever was pulling their strings was both wealthy and ostentatious, not a good sign. He saw intense mindless cruelty in the puppets eyes but they would do as they were told. He let them put him in the car, the Hardy getting in beside him, the Laurel slipping his gun away before climbing into the drivers seat.

With the guns hidden, Lechasseur chanced a question: Where are we going?

Four beads of contempt from the Hardy: Mestizer wants to talk.

He smiled thoughtfully and nodded. The name meant nothing.

The Silver Ghost slid away and soon passed out of the familiar neighbourhood, heading north beyond Camden. The journey was smooth and he reflected that he should be abducted in style more often. His kidnappers were silent but he doubted they had much to say, so he passed the time watching the streets. The others made no attempt to stop him.

There was a reinforced leather bolster separating the back seats from the front but Lechasseur had soon realised that there was a fourth person in the car with them, sitting ahead of him in the front passenger seat. They were not Laurel and Hardy then but Groucho, Chico and now the ghoulishly silent Harpo. The bolster blocked Lechasseurs view but the Harpo looked bald, or was perhaps wearing a skullcap or leather helmet. He had a large blank dome of a scalp.

Lechasseur noticed that the whole of the front passenger seat had been removed, so the Harpo must be squatting in the gouged cavity.

Beyond Camden he was in unfamiliar territory. Still, they said hed be returned by midnight, which meant they couldnt be going far. It turned out to be another half hours journey, into the comfortable northern suburbs of London. There was more green out here, more space between buildings though the trees were November-naked. The car followed a back road along the line of a high brick wall. The trees behind the walls were healthily leafed as if their enclosed world was still in summer. Up ahead the wall was broken by elaborate iron gates that had somehow escaped their war-duty.

Lechasseur wasnt entirely surprised when the car turned into the driveway. The gates yawned and the car swept down a gravel track into the grounds beyond the wall.

The house in the grounds was in silhouette and blotted out the night sky with a different darkness. The cars headlights passed over the walls as it approached but picked out only fiddly detail on the edifice. It had a deep gravity that hurt Lechasseurs eyes when he tried to take it in, it was too large. The car turned down a side path rather than approach the main doors and slowed by a dark-glassed conservatory extension.

The Hardy produced his gun and prodded Lechasseur out of the car. The Silver Ghosts engine hummed and it slid away once the two men were out of the back. With a twitch of his gun, the Hardy pointed him to a side door on the conservatory. Lechasseur tugged it open and took a blast of sweltering air in the face.

In London, Mrs Bag-of-Bones guest house had a small scrap-filled yard and a patch of yellowing grass. The conservatory here was at least five times that size and filled with colour. It was a paradise of hothouse orchids and exotic fruits feeding from the scalding hot lights arranged in gantries along the ceiling and from the fecund red earth that coated the floor. November had been banished from the glasshouse, which

had seemed so much smaller on the outside, and there was a ripe stench of vegetation and dry soil in the sweltering air. But there was no birdsong, no sounds except the tread of the two pairs of feet and a babble of water. Everything was still and fake.

If he broke a plants stem Lechasseur was sure hed find it artificial, ultra-modern.

There was a model pool in the centre of the room, fed from a false spring among the plants and lined with pebbles. They walked round the edge and Lechasseur resisted the urge to touch the water to find if it were as cold as he suspected. The conservatory was baking hot and wet, not enough to make him uncomfortable but the Hardy was sweating. He stopped Lechasseur by the poolside, where wicker chairs were arranged around a table. Lechasseur sat and watched the Hardy remove his coat. The goons flesh was blotched with heat, he grunted and any resemblance to the pompous, dignified Oliver Hardy of Hollywood left him. He laid his gun on the table it wasnt worth grabbing for produced a pocket-sized magazine from his coat and began to read, all the while keeping a low eye on his captive. Astounding, read the cover, in a grey so faded it was hard to see. With its cold, painted illustration of an impossible domed city it looked far more elegant than the man holding it.

Lechasseur blinked. The magazines journey by freight across the Atlantic; the thugs head underwater; a red mushroom cloud, billowing outwards. He looked up, his captor was staring at him with a curled sneer on his lips, followed by spittle. The thug began a furious rant, his voice on fire:

Wipe that cocky grin off your face you filthy heathen bastard youll not be smiling when the Big Man sees you He will cut you in two with your guts hanging from your wretched black body He is worth ten times any man and a hundred of you He is the machine-man that we will all become God-willing when men are born from metal wombs when He was a man He fought the Hun those wicked bastards of Satan cut Him apart and left Him to die the dogs! but now He is repaired His mortal skin and bone rebuilt with steel and pumps and electrics that will not wear or fail He is the Steersman of Future Time no man commands him not least you the lowest thing that walks on two legs.

Lechasseur folded his arms but didnt change his face. It was important to stay cool.

The thug might only have paused for breath but there was a gentle rustling of vegetation from deeper in the room. Lechasseur turned, saw the Big Man and realised that his advocate had not been exaggerating.

He was big, at least eight feet tall and maybe half as broad. Lechasseur realised at once that this was the Harpo hed been sitting behind and understood why the passenger seat had been cut out of the Silver Ghost. Whether he was a man or not was difficult to tell as he was covered in oily brown leather. He had a long brown coat, jangling with buckles; its hem brushed the floor, hung more like a cloak than a coat.

Despite his width he didnt seem fat or ungainly, he moved swiftly and Lechasseur got a sense of a powerful muscular mass hidden under the leather. He wore thick black gloves and his head was covered by a tight leather hood that eliminated his features.

He saw through darkened gasmask goggles and breathed through a tapering, trembling proboscis. The high collar on the coat hid his neck.

The other newcomer was a woman. She walked in front of the Big Man and seemed diminutive in his shadow, though in fact she was about as tall as Lechasseur. She dressed in black, a long bare-shoulder dress that looked almost as uncomfortable as the Big Mans leathers. She was also gloved, elegantly and up to her elbows. She had long, straight black hair and her eyes were hidden behind round smoked-glass spectacles. Her skin was ice-white, almost blue, especially around her lips. The Big Man stopped when she did and stood guard as she knelt down to run a gloved hand through the pool water. She was laughing faintly. Lechasseur understood which of the two was in charge and the more dangerous.

Mr Lechasseur, she said precisely, rising and approaching him she had a condescending English Rose voice. I think weve brought you all this way for nothing. I am Mestizer.

Her glasses came off and she was staring into his eyes, she had warm blue irises, flecked with gold, they sucked at him hard as though trying to draw his soul out of his body. He thought of the dancing dog at the Inferno, and realised how petty Walkens powers were. This woman could have had the dog playing Hamlet.

He didnt need to be hypnotised. With an effort, he changed the way

he looked at her.

She blinked, a moment of frustration, then covered her eyes with her glasses.

Oh, very good, she said airily. Let me introduce you. Casual wave at the leather giant. That is Abraxas, my lieutenant. Do as youre told and youll never see him again. Youve already met finger twisting at her hired gun thing.

Delighted, Lechasseur said dryly. Mestizer offered him a drink, then a swim. He said no to both.

A shame, she pouted, I come here each night to swim, when no ones around. You know, you really are very good. If Id seen you from a distance I might have been fooled. Youve been giving us quite the runaround. Lets hope we dont bump into one another again. It might make me unhappy.

She sat and wrinkled her face as if to indicate the seat were still warm. Abraxas moved closer. He couldnt sit, he would have broken the chair. Lechasseur could feel him, less than a foot away, a looming oily presence. Abraxas seethed when he breathed, a coarse mechanical sound.

Any man would be fooled, Mestizer continued, showing a mouth full of white teeth and hidden menace. But Im not a man. How much is Walken paying you?

Lechasseur shrugged. Im not working for Walken.

That seemed to be the wrong answer, she looked bitter in disappointment. Only Walken would try something like this. I believe he has guts but no brains, though someday soon Abraxas will slice him open so we can be sure. She got to the point: You were seen coming

out of the Inferno today.

My first visit. He was reasonable. Walken threw me out.

But Mestizer didnt want to hear this. She was staring at him through the dark globes of her spectacles and there wasnt a bead of sweat on her perfect cool-white body. He could see blue faultline arteries under her skin and she looked back at him with an odd mix of revulsion and fascination. She wasnt looking at his face or his skin, she was looking into him, at the soul shed tried to pluck.

Tell Walken the cabinet is mine. Tell him that if he bothers me I will kill him. I will kill everyone with him. I will kill his friends. I will kill his debtors. I will kill his family and their friends. I will kill everyone he has ever loved. Tell him he is meddling with forces he doesnt understand that usually goes down well. Tell him to forget the cabinet and forget the Doctor.

Mention of the Doctor caught his attention. If he hadnt been so nervous he might have been more cautious, but he said it anyway: And what about the girl in pink pyjamas?

Mestizer craned her head upwards, addressing Abraxas. Loose ends, she said. Tell Walken I dont care what he does to her. She cant tell him anything. He can have her.

Shed kept her hands close together, steepling her fingers as she talked, but suddenly she flung them open. Bored now! she sang. I want to swim. The water has regenerative properties, its good for me, if no-one else. Go on, go away, you dont want to see me naked anyway.

Lechasseur, his heart still thumping from the stupid moment when hed said too much, decided to risk it: I wouldnt complain.

She had a smile like nothing in nature, a crooked thing the wrong shape for her mouth. No. You dont want to see me when I take my skin off.

Only the ex-Hardy laughed and maybe for him it was a joke.

Take Mr Lechasseur home, Mestizer ordered. One thing before you go stick your nose into my business again and I will have it cut off. Its been a pleasure.

With the gun brandished once again and the copy of Astounding tucked back into his pocket, the ex-Hardy led Lechasseur out into the bitter dark, where the car was waiting. This time Abraxas came with them, a rasping shadow at Lechasseurs back.

Nothing was said in the Silver Ghost during the journey home. One thought came back to him, in the silence and the dark. If these were the men Mrs Bag-of-Bones had been warning him about for days, then they had been looking for him since before hed heard of Eric Walken or the Doctor or even Emily Blandish, and that made no sense.

Unless I really am working for Walken, with Emily as a go-between. Thats possible.

They stopped the car at his doorstep before midnight, but as he moved to open the car door his name was spoken.

Lechasseur

An electrical voice, like the distort on a radio, flecked with static.

Without warning the bolster separating the front and back seats was ripped apart, leathered wood and metal rods parting like butter. Abraxas bulbous leathery face peered through the gap and Lechasseur saw himself mirrored in the discs of his eyes.

I will be watching you

One wrong move and you will belong to me

Lechasseur stepped out of the car and stayed to watch it move away.

3: THE GIRL WHO WASNT THERE

LOOK, SAID THE LANDLADY. THERES A BLACK MAN HERE TO SEE YOU.

Lechasseur spent the night trying to make sense of the previous days events, but eventually hed given up, the pattern loomed large and unfathomable. There was too much new information. He would have to report back to Mrs Blandish before he could make the connections. He reached for the whiskey bottle and stared entranced at his window until the sun came up to sting his eyes. His waking dreams were hazy and confused. Looking at the twilight steel skyline, he imagined he was back in the Dorset hospital where hed spent the last months of the war. He displaced himself into the past, into a memory of a time when he was confined to a wheelchair in a building with infinite whitewashed corridors and no exit.

Later, he watched the dawn through reddened eyes and felt more hopeful. He had a plan for today: he would visit the girl in pink pyjamas and there didnt seem to be any harm in that. No one had got much sense out of her over the past weeks but maybe they hadnt been asking her the right questions.

Questions like: Do you know where I can find the Doctor?

When he asked, she just stared and blinked, it meant nothing to her, nothing at all.

It was drizzling over Shoreditch that morning. The slow spots of rain felt dirty-warm on his skin as he cycled to the address hed stolen from the club. The house stood towards one end of a long, meandering brick lane. At the east end of the street, further up than he had meant to go, there was nothing, no buildings, just redbrick mounds where children played.

The number he wanted was in an unscarred stretch of terrace, one of a sequence of near identical narrow houses with lace over the windows and doors painted different colours in a stab at individuality. The door was opened by a sturdy middle-aged woman in a faded floral dress. There was a sour curl of suspicion on her lips, this was what the papers had called the Blitz Spirit. A card in her window said NO IRISH, NO

DOGS but shed left room for more. Lechasseur tipped his hat and announced he had come to see the girl in pink pyjamas, this and a ten bob note helped improve her mood and he was invited inside. He was, she apologised, earlier than most callers who came to visit the living mystery.

She hasnt remembered anything, he queried, not even her name?

The landlady shook her head and didnt look at him. She led him up the stairs towards the girls room. He was an unannounced visitor, a surprise.

What name do you call her? Lechasseur asked, but she had stopped listening.

She knocked on the door and pushed it open. Look, she said. Theres a black man here to see you.

It was gloomy and airless in the house and the crack of the door was darker still. He wondered if she was still in bed after all, if shed forgotten everything she would have forgotten how to sleep and when. No, her voice came back from the room, faint but not tired, asking him to be sent in.

The landlady still kept the door blocked. Im making some tea, do you want some?

Yes.

She pulled back and tapped Lechasseur roughly on the shoulder. Go in, she said, she wont bite. Then she turned and climbed back down the stairs, hobbling as though each step were painful, though shed been quite sprightly on the way up.

Typical eccentric Brit. Lechasseur pushed on through into the dark.

The girls room was unlit but there was just enough daylight filtering through to see the edges of her world. It was a small room, not much larger than his own, actually

he realised as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom a little smaller and bristling with clutter. There was only the one door, one exit unless you counted the windows.

The air tasted of must and mothballs, as if the fresh air had been breathed-up weeks ago and never replenished. The walls were papered and patterned with wilting brown fleur-de-lis. There was a narrow mantelpiece to the right of the door, over a blocked-up fireplace, decorated with photographs framed sepia darknesses and a coronation mug, probably predating the rooms current tenant. A fire would have been more use, as despite the lived-in scent of the room it was chilly.

Most of the far wall was window; it was a front room and should have commanded a view of the street outside. Hed assumed the curtains were closed but no, they were folded back to their edges. The light was locked out by raised blackout boards. The silhouette girl no longer in pink pyjamas but a plain blouse and skirt sat in the chair in the middle of the dark room, staring at her visitor, her eyes glistening.

She was small, he must have seemed a giant shadow before her.

This is cosy, Lechasseur said, hoping to break the mood. She said nothing.

Im called Honoré Lechasseur, he added breezily but awkward. Honoré was an odd given name, he didnt like to use it with strangers. Id like to ask you some questions. I dont know if you can help…

Thats a good name, she said. He heard her lips twitching, repeating it silently.

Thank you.

Her eyes slid sideways and down in the dark. You can ask me things.

Lots of people come here to talk to me. Her voice was becalmed. Her arms were stretched out on the rests either side of her, there was no energy in her body.

Why do you think they do that?

She rippled. Im a big mystery, they want to find out about me. Sometimes they think I can tell the future, but I dont know anything. The way she said anything sounded ominously complete. Lechasseur couldnt hear an accent beyond British, her background had been wiped clean along with her memory. He thought of the precise voices of BBC

radio, hers was honed just as smooth, though less mannered.

Are you a detective?

What makes you ask that?

Youre American. I cant be famous in America. They mustve sent for you specially.

She sighed. Im sure no one in America can have heard of me

Ive been here for a long time. Im not a detective. He paused, wondering how best to phrase his next sentence. I came to warn you, youre in danger.

She was looking at him again but he couldnt tell if she believed him. The room trembled, then shook, the walls vibrating violently and the photographs dancing on the mantelpiece. The silence was drowned by the clatter of coaches, a train passing close by. It rose and fell in the space of a minute and the girl didnt say a word.

This house backs onto the railroad?

Yes.

That might be your best bet. If someone tries to grab you from the house theyll probably come through the front. If that happens get out the back along the rails, if you can.

The girl laughed faintly, in silhouette. Youre serious, arent you?

A man called Eric Walken is planning to kidnap you. I dont know when but soon

hes already postponed it once. Does that name mean anything to you? Silence in the darkness. The Inferno Club? Covent Garden?

Her head was shaking. No. Not a thing.

The landlady returned bearing tea on a tray. She shuffled past Lechasseur to lay it on the table between them, two half-full mugs and a plate of grey biscuits. There was an electric lamp on the table and she turned it on. The little light struggled in the gloom but Lechasseur got a clearer view of the girl and her face. It was an odd shape, stuck undecided between narrow and chubby. She had pale skin, dark shadows round her eyes. Green irises, watery and stubborn. She didnt wear make-up, or hadnt recently.

Thank you, Mrs Beardsley, she said. The landlady looked stocky in her tan coat and headscarf.

Im going out shopping, she said pointedly. I wont be long.

She pulled the door to after her. The girl reached hungrily for her tea and biscuits and nodded for Lechasseur to do the same. He touched the mug to his lips, it was lukewarm and filmed-over, he didnt drink but put it away on the mantelpiece.

Shes very good to me, Mrs Beardsley. She smiled wistfully, the first hed seen from her. No one else would put me up.

He grinned back at her. Thats not true. Youre a celebrity. People in this town would have been fighting to put a roof over your head.

If you say so, but theres the rent…

I thought the papers were paying!

She shrugged again, it was a pretty gesture. The tea, the biscuits and the landladys departure seemed to have relaxed her. I hadnt heard that. Do you really think Im in trouble?

I know Walken is having you watched. Theres a spy hanging around the other side of the street. Hes keeping an eye on you. Do you go out much? She shook her head.

Next time you do, therell be someone on your tail.

She giggled and leant back, out of the light. Youre pulling my leg.

Im serious.

There are lots of people outside. This is a busy street. He could be anyone.

Hes standing guard. Trust me, I was a soldier. I know a sentry when I see one. She still looked sceptical. Look, if we take one of these boards down youll be able to see for yourself.

She looked reluctant, but her face creased as if to say why not?

That was good, he felt he was getting through to her. They went to the window together. She didnt have the stature or the strength to be much help taking the board down, she was a lot smaller than him and as he struggled with the blackout they bumped into each other, her narrow chin banging against his shoulder.

A soft rectangle of winter light opened into the room, picking out the dust flecks on the air and the face of the woman hed come to see. In the dark he could have believed that she was a girl, but she looked older in the natural light, maybe mid-twenties. She had a childs smooth skin and her long brown hair was worn loose like a schoolgirls, but there was a flaw of experience running down her face. Hed seen cracks like that on the faces of men whod been broken at Omaha. The abyss opened in their eyes and gradually the rest of their self was sucked in. It was a wound.

From this height he could see that the empty lot opposite wasnt a true bombsite. The building had been torn down deliberately and neatly, probably unsafe after a raid. He saw it as it would be in the future, a nothing between the houses, theyd make it a yard but thered be no new building there for decades. It would stay there, an absent war memorial.

There was no one there. Walkens spy had gone, or was hiding.

The girl laughed and went back to her seat.

It took us a while to get the blackout down, Lechasseur protested. He had plenty of warning.

You really are a detective, Mr Lechasseur.

He eased round to face her again. He must have looked tired from standing so the girl indicated he should sit on the bed. He lowered himself wearily onto it, all the while studying her face for clues. She still looked nervous and expectant but had relaxed in the light. It fell across one half of her face, she was very pretty.

As a boy hed been friends with a girl called Cecile, a blue-eyed Cajun. He was nine, she was five years older, but shed been taken with his sullen isolated sensitivity.

Hed saved enough money to buy her ice cream, one day in the poor depressed American summer, and they sat together on a baking sidewalk, while behind them old prune-skinned men argued on their benches, while in front a funeral parade went by. Cecile sweated under her blouse and cotton skirt, a heady scent, and they shared that moment totally without speaking.

He still couldnt speak. Cecile was here in front of him. Ice cream would have burned his mouth in Britain, but he wanted to taste it. Comradeship. The girl looked uncomfortable but stayed polite through the silence.

He said: Im not a detective. Im a fixer.

Yes? You mean youre someone who mends things? Can you fix people? He shook his head. It means Im a spiv. Black marketeer. I can fix you up with whatever you need, whatever you want, if the price is right. Black marketeer? She laughed and he was relieved to find he wasnt offended. So, she said, reaching for something solid after her fit of giggles. She was still tiny and vulnerable in her chair. What can I do for you?

Ill be honest, I never paid much attention to those newspaper stories about you. I came here because I found out about Walken. Im looking for someone whos disappeared and he and maybe you are mixed up in that.

She nodded. This sounds good. One person disappears, another mysteriously appears, maybe theres a balance.

I dont think it works that way, unless youre a man whos been magically transformed into a woman. He nearly said girl. Read any Kafka?

She shook her head playfully. I dont remember.

Have you ever met anyone who calls himself the Doctor?

Ive met loads of doctors. None of them knows whats wrong with me.

Not anyone whos the Doctor?

No. She smiled through her wounded face, leaning forward. Whats wrong?

He felt winded. Hed been so sure that she was connected to the Doctor. Her sincere hollow reply left him with nothing. She was still leant forward, scared in her eyes that shed said the wrong thing. Youve dead-ended me, he stammered. I think Ive wasted your time…

He tried to rise, but the girl leapt up and grabbed his shoulders firmly.

Dont go yet, she told him. Stay, please. I have to go to the other room for a moment but please, I wont be long. Youre not taking up my time at all.

Reluctantly he sank back onto the bed, from here the girl seemed to tower.

Theres a scrapbook under my pillow. Its got a lot of my clippings. Take a look through, she suggested. There might be something in there that isnt in here. Her hand went to the side of her head, fleetingly as if she were scared of damaging it.

She scurried away.

Lechasseur found the book and began to flip through it. It wasnt much different from the file hed found in Walkens office, though here and now he had time to browse.

There wasnt much. The story of how the girl walked out of the night with amnesia was familiar and the papers added nothing but speculation. There had been blasts in the East End that night and the more sober papers speculated, proofless, that she was a shell-shocked victim of a leftover bomb. Of course, that left the mystery of why no one had come forward to identify her.

The yellow press thought shed been dropped off by a flying disc. Typical.

The later clippings were from puff pieces, describing the girls celebrity. She was receiving visitors from all over the capital: well-wishers and admirers bringing her presents; amateur sleuths trying to solve the mystery; advertisers looking for endorsements. Lechasseur felt guiltily selfish. He turned a page and found himself staring at The Girl in the Pink Bikini, a yellow press piece with a full-length photograph of just that. She looked ashamed of herself in the picture. Londons favourite mystery girl takes clothes rationing seriously! WE

know its on the way out but dont jog HER memory just yet!

He heard her step back into the room. You were talking about light when they found you. Do you remember anything about that?

Just a flash of light, I remember. It was coming out of a door not a house, a wardrobe or a cabinet. They say I was caught in a blast but I couldnt tell you for certain.

He looked up at her. Shed changed out of her clothes and was standing in the frame of the door in her pink pyjamas. He must have looked shocked. Whats the matter?

she said, hurt.

Most of the men who come here want to see this. Dont you?

I dont mind. I wasnt expecting it.

Do you want me to take them off?

Yes. No. Im happy if you want to wear them. He raised his hands in surrender.

The girl stumbled into the room, he tried to imagine her wandering out of the fog like that but here she was too self-conscious. She stayed clear of the exposed windowpane. Modesty? Or had she really believed his warning about Walkens spy?

She didnt sit back in her chair but perched eagerly on the bed beside him, taking the scrapbook from his lap and closing it up. She was a strange creature, scrubbed clean of her identity. She leaned forward, trying to kiss him, but he resisted and she planted it on his dry, unmoving lips. When he didnt respond she turned bashful, stiffening and sliding back on the bed.

Did you think of anything more to ask? she said, drably.

Theres something Id like to try. She nodded. When you were a kid, did you ever play the game

I dont remember being a kid but go on.

Okay, have you ever played that game where you have two people and one person says a word and the second has to say the first thing that comes into their head?

Ive tried that, it doesnt work.

Ive tried it too. I was in hospital, screwed up, they put a doctor onto me to sort me out.

The Doctor?

He hummed. I wouldnt think so. Try it, he said. Cat

She drew a silent finger across her lips then lay back on her bed, between him and the wall. The front of her pyjama jacket rode up slightly, revealing a tight skinny stomach. He could hear her breathe.

Abraxas

Ice cream

Doctor

Light

He could hear the rain dribbling on the window, the dust shimmering on the air, the uncomfortable shift of the girls body on the rustling bedclothes. Her eyes were glazed over, not with boredom, with fascination. It was the crack in her face, sucking him in, shed recognised the same wound on him.

It hasnt done anything for me. Theyve tried it. I dont seem to be able to make the connections. A cat is just a cat to me. Did this do you any good?

Im here arent I?

Good point. What did the doctor say about the game, what it revealed about you?

He thought I was being hostile, reacting negatively to everything he said. He said cat, I said dog. He said black, I said white. War/peace. Man/ woman. Little/big. I turned his words inside out. Then he said, theres nothing wrong with that, its good for a soldier to think that way.

So?

That was when I understood I didnt want to be a soldier. He was a good guy, that doctor. He was a little Scotsman, one of those royal eccentrics you have over here.

Only doctor Ive ever seen with a beard.

What were you in hospital for? The girl sat up perkily and cross-legged, her face full of innocent enquiry. Lechasseur couldnt resist.

I got caught in a blast, got my legs mangled, couldnt walk for a year or two. It wasnt a problem. He was speaking softly and she leant forward to pick up on the words. Everyone else in my platoon was killed, except the sentries we left outside.

We shouldnt even have been there.

Where were you?

Belgium. We should have been in France, we strayed too far north into unsecured territory. We took shelter in a farmhouse that the Germans had just cleared out of in a hurry. SS, we thought. Theyd looted the place but left a lot of wine and a grand piano and a whole ton of dynamite in the piano. We got drunk and we blew ourselves up.

He paused wistfully, his senses suddenly filled with the rich and vivid memory of the night. There was the scented mix of spilled wine and cigar ash in the air, spoils of war. Something sparked, jolting him back to the tasteless present, where the pyjama girl hadnt breathed since hed fallen silent.

I remember, he continued, the senior officer was white. Thats the way of the US

army. He and I were the only two there who could have played a note on that piano, you know? Most of the others were from Harlem… Chicago different worlds. They made the lieutenant an honorary Negro. He was half Jewish, they reckoned he was a quarter way there already. They baptised him with wine and he sat down to play the piano to celebrate. And the next thing I know Im in a convent back in France thats been turned into a field hospital and I cant feel my legs and all these sweet, ugly nuns are talking to me in French because theyve heard my name and think I can understand them.

I wasnt burned, not even singed. You know, when they found me they found the lieutenants hands? Perfectly intact, just shorn off at the wrist. I never understood that.

The girl breathed deeply, shaking as he talked. A tear slid down her face: You know so much about yourself, theres so much inside you. Dont stop.

It was his life and it was stinging her. She listened to him carefully but he was sure she was hurting with inner emptiness. Her eyes, big and round, were painfully hungry for experience. Then suddenly it all came out, his story, the high and lowlights of his life. He talked her through the rest of the war and the time hed spent in hospital. He described the sullen campaign hed waged against the authorities, the odd rules he broke, the curious offences that had made him popular with the other patients and the civilian staff. He told her about the canny head-shrinker theyd put onto him, whod persuaded him to go into exile in London, on the run from his own people. He told her about the black market and as he talked he realised that he liked being a racketeer as much as he liked being a soldier, but he couldnt tell her that.

He backtracked and told her about the Crescent City hed left behind to go to France.

He told her about the Cajuns and the bayou, the jazz men and the Big Easy. He described relative wealth and desperate poverty, the Depression and le bontemps. He told her about Rosewood and strange fruit, he told her about fear. He told her about Cecile and the day of eating ice cream. It all came out in a tumble of words, each one spontaneous and perfect. Then he began to tell her about the last few days, describing what had happened in his search for the Doctor.

It electrified her, a violent spirit filling the gap of her eyes. She snatched at him, too quick for him to react.

What did you just say? She clawed at his jacket, holding him tight and desperate.

I said Ive been hired to find the Doctor by his wife.

And?

Her name is Emily Blandish. I met her in a cafe and

She cut him off. All this time, she said, Ive known that I would remember one thing. Her mouth was a fierce line, blood between her teeth. She was all anger, it burned undirected in her voice, the mute gone from her throat. I would remember it, something would jog my mind, then I would know. And youve just jogged me. Youve given me one thing back.

Given you what? He tried to calm her, pushing her gently back onto the bed, but she fought.

My name! You think I wouldnt know my name. Its not her! It came from her mouth as a brutal noise, her identity screaming out of her. Its not her! Its me! Im Emily Blandish! Not her! Not her!

He drew his hands back. Okay okay okay, I believe you.

That seemed to calm her down, she squatted on her haunches but her face was swollen and red, bleeding tears. He pushed his head close to hers so she could hear.

Emily, do you remember anything else?

No, she shook her head.

Do you know who this woman is who claims to be you?

No.

Are you married to someone called the Doctor?

She snorted, held up her naked fingers. If I am I dont remember.

Behind Lechasseur the door opened and he turned just enough for the newcomer to punch him across the face. He slumped against the wall but then rough hands lifted him and dragged him off the bed. He tried to grab at his attacker but hed been caught off guard. The newcomer was a strong man, not army trained but powerful enough not to need it. Emily was shrieking, not for herself, for him. She was Emily, he knew it as clearly as she knew herself.

Walken, he thought, as his assailant pushed him out through the door, but he was wrong. He landed sprawled on his back, gazing up at the solid trunk and scowling face of Mrs Beardsley. She spat onto him, missing his face. Shes mine, stay away from her, she told him.

He got quickly to his feet. Through the door he saw the man whod punched him bald and scarred but with an unmistakable family resemblance to the landlady. Emily stopped screaming once he drove his fist into her stomach. Her pyjama bottom had already come off. Yellow-purple bruises spotted her flank. The man grabbed a bunch of her hair and held her wordlessly, like a prize catch. Then his sister pulled the door closed so Lechasseur saw no more.

Get out of my house, Mrs Beardsley said, or Ill call the police and say you were hurting her. Did you see those bruises? And whos ever seen a guiltier face than yours?

He had a moments vision before his eyes, a dream or the future. He slammed the landladys worm-body hard against her wall, her brother hunched double, blood seeping from his mouth, how long has she been gone?! He was back in the dank gloomy present, Mrs Beardsley squinting at him from the door.

Trying not to listen to the whimpers of fear from the room of the pink pyjama girl, Lechasseur turned and made his way down the stairs. The landladys cold hateful eyes followed him but they werent as cold and hateful as his.

The window was blacked-out again as he left the house. Outside, he grabbed his bike then spotted Walkens spy watching him from the far side of the road. Hed come in black, blending into the shadows but Lechasseur gave him a glare and the man realised hed been spotted.

Hey! Lechasseur bellowed. Hey! Come and get her. Shed be better off with you!

Without waiting for a reply, he climbed onto his bike and cycled away.

4: KUBERNETES RISING

LECHASSEUR HADNT YET REACHED THE POINT WHEN HIS SPIRIT FOLDED INWARDS, THE

point of giving up. He still had hope and it lasted almost to the end of the afternoon. He felt bruised from the fight at the boarding house, he needed somewhere to rest and heal. The rain washed over his face, making him numb. He went to a café for lunch and sat facing the door, cautiously weighing the features of each new customer. He hoped the girl in pink pyjamas might have followed him from the flat but she hadnt. He blinked heavily.

The girl in pink pyjamas. Walken. Mestizer. Emily Blandish. The pieces of the mystery. They made no sense, not singly, not as a whole. The common absence was the Doctor. He held all the threads, finding him was Lechasseurs only chance of making the connections he needed. The outline of the Doctor hed formed was shadowy and hard to pin down. It grew more elusive the closer he got.

Where now? Syme? Still the best lead and he didnt even believe the Doctor was real. Unless Syme was lying, which was possible. It was also possible that the whole of London was in on the scam, a conspiracy directed by the Doctor to deceive the fixer. No, going back to Syme was admitting defeat. Emily Blandish then, his starting point? He was due to update her on his progress, he could drop in unannounced. He could find out what her real name was, then what she really wanted with the Doctor and that might just give him a firm place to stand. He left the café in an optimistic mood. For once, his foresight was letting him down.

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The address hed been given by his client he supposed he couldnt call her Emily Blandish any more was fifteen minutes ride from the café, his progress held up by a heavy bustle of crowds on the market streets. London everywhere was a city of noise and slow movement but hed grown used to the rhythm of his Northside neighbourhood.

The tempo of life here was different, faster, harder. People clogged the streets but slipped out of reach before he could pin down their faces. This was the ruthless clearing ground of the city.

The address might turn out to be as false as the name. Another premonition? No, he didnt believe that. Pilots had premonitions, not soldiers. Pilots travelled through a fragile, deadly medium, they had a right to them. Soldiers, rooted to the ground, merely had morbid thoughts. Fixers too. And Doctors? They were so close to death they could see it coming and dodge it when they could.

The address was real, the building was real. Did the un-Emily live here? Hard to tell, without venturing in. It was four storeys, split into flats. The door was locked, there was no bell and no one answered his knocks. He stepped back to study the windows but they were smudged-grey, lifeless. They were huge rectangular bays with narrow sills. False-Emily, judging by the number, was on the top floor.

At the side of the house, Lechasseur found a makeshift fire escape. A tight window at the top was lockless. The ragged curtains disintegrated as he climbed through, adding another layer of dust to an already profoundly empty room. He glanced down, saw footsteps in the dust, a thin feminine heel. There was a telephone in the corner, raised on a protective layer of newspaper, notepapers spread on the floor beside it.

He moved on. The next room was larger and fuller, spanning the length of the building. This floor had been gutted long ago stubs of wood and plaster were ripped along invisible lines on the floor but it wasnt abandoned. There was a bed, unmade, strewn with magazines; a dressing table with a mirror, decorated with personal ornaments and a cluster of ration books; a wardrobe. Cold air seeped in from the balcony. He pushed at one of the side doors a kitchen, empty but newly warm.

He tried the next door, calling out for Emily. His voice came back at him from a tinny tiled echo chamber, he breathed in the scent of soap and disinfectant. He knew it was a bathroom before the afternoon half-light let him see. The dark was trapped here, his eyes took a moment to adjust, which was why he didnt see her straight away. She was sitting on the edge of the tub, Mrs Emily Blandish, whoever she really was. Her arm was stretched out rigid, her eyes tight shut, her teeth bared and her revolver pointed right at his head.

It cracked.

Funny, no German ever pointed a gun at me that way, so close I could see the barrel.

Their bullets were anonymous. Im not used to this.

Too late to take the gun, he hit the floor and rolled.

The gun spoke again but Emily wasnt looking and fired high.

What happened next would depend on whether she meant to kill him. He risked it: Dont shoot! Its me! Lechasseur!

Horror-shock flicked up her face, her eyes came open and she dropped the gun as though it were filthy. It clattered as it struck the floor but didnt fire on impact and so didnt take the top of his skull off. Emilys mouth gaped but she put a hand over it and reached out to help him up. Her hands, her arms, were soft. She hadnt been aiming for him.

Bloody hell, Im sorry, she breathed. I didnt know it was you. I was jumpy.

It wouldve been okay to plug me if I was someone else? he asked.

She nodded grimly, not seeing the joke. Bloody right! Youre about the only one I dont want to shoot right now. I trust you.

Seeing he was unhurt, she sank back on the edge of the tub, shaking. He found himself believing her; she didnt look malicious. Then he remembered she was an actress. She was a bigger woman than the real Emily. She looked more substantial, like she actually belonged in this world, and she was just as pretty but she didnt have the complicated wound on her face. Lechasseur realised he was shaking too and he folded his arms round her to steady himself.

I wasnt expecting you till the weekend.

Lechasseur persuaded Emily to part with the revolver, though at her insistence he reloaded it and left it on her dressing table. She wouldnt tell him who she was expecting and he didnt want to press her, not yet. I told you it was a dangerous job, was the closest she came to an explanation. She fixed him a drink, all she had were mugs and cheap gin

better than cold tea, it took the edge off both his shock and his bruised pain.

Emily Blandish. Now she was here in front of him he found it impossible to separate her from the name. Shed stolen it but she wore it well. Take that away and she would become as abstract in his mind

as the Doctor and she deserved to be real, fleshy and warm-blooded. She fiddled with the top button on her blouse. It was dark red, the same colour as her skirt, it suited her skin.

Theres not a problem with the money? she asked. He shook his head. No problem.

Her first instalment had been generous, prompt and delivered invisibly. Whatever happens to me, she told him, youll be paid what youre owed. Ive made arrangements.

He sat on a stool. She stood, anxious and fidgety. She was the opposite of the real Emily. He hoped she might try to lie down on the bed, relax, but she wouldnt.

You think youre in danger.

Ive disappointed some people. Dont worry about me.

If you tell me about it, I could look after you.

She snorted. Ive heard that one before.

Its not the money, he said. She nodded brusquely and went to the balcony window.

Lechasseur wondered if he shouldnt confront her about the other Emily straight out, but that didnt seem the right way. This Emily was on edge. Too much pressure now and hed lose her along with every solid link he had back into the mystery of the Doctor.

Besides, he liked her. She was a liar and shed shot at him but he liked her.

Im picking up speed, he told her evenly. I wanted to let you know. The last three days have been hectic. A lots come up. That at least was true.

Have you found him? She didnt turn.

Your husband?

The Doctor. Not yet. Actually the best lead I got was from a man who

said he doesnt exist.

She laughed. She had her mug pressed up against her stomach and wasnt drinking. Her fingernails tapped the rim nervously. Oh, hes very real. Trust me

Youd know that better than anyone, Lechasseur replied, then realised he was baiting her and moved on. That led me to a man called Walken. Have you heard of him?

She looked at him and he saw her face was piqued with genuine curiosity, real surprise. Eric Walken? The hypnotist?

Thats the one. Do you know him?

Her head was shaking, painfully slowly. Ive met him. I did cabaret work for him after the war. Hows he mixed up in this?

I dont know but I understand he met your husband yesterday.

Finally she walked away from the window and perched herself on the edge of the bed.

I had no idea he was involved. I havent seen him for years.

Perhaps you could introduce me properly. We didnt get on

Oh, neither did I. Hes what they call a little creep. He hypnotised me once and I still dont remember what I did. You know Ive done some bad business since the war and mainly its been so I can work with people he hates. On and off stage, she spat.

Does your husband know about your association with Walken?

He probably does. He does now. Walken is a stage name, you know?

No. Whats ?

I dont know, she broke in. Higginbottom or something like that, something that doesnt sound right for a black magician. Not a name to conjure with. She laughed suddenly and it washed out of her for a minute, the sound of relief.

He tried another angle. Did you hear about the girl in pink pyjamas?

Who hasnt? He didnt register any special interest.

Theres a connection with her and the Doctor. Walkens found out about it. I went to see her this morning to see if she knew anything. She didnt but, deep breath

she remembered her name while I was there.

Yeah? She didnt flicker. He had the impression he was about to surprise her.

Her names Emily Blandish, he said.

The false Emily had her head bowed at that moment, she was staring at the floor. Her hands opened. The gin spilled onto the carpet, the mug followed and broke into three pieces.

Kind of a weird coincidence, Lechasseur observed.

When she looked up at him her features were fixed in a rictus of guilt and fear, they werent solid any more. They phased between Emily and not-Emily. She said: I didnt know it was her. It was the name he told me to use.

Who? Walken? Dont be daft. I wouldnt do anything he told me for a million pounds. So you admit youre not Emily Blandish.

She hovered in her inbetween state before admitting: My name is Miranda Sessions.

Actually its Enid Cross but Miranda Sessions sounds, well, sultrier, more mysterious, sexier, she pronounced it with her teeth. Everything else I told you about myself is true. I wouldnt lie about stuff like that. Just the name.

And about being married?

Well, that was the other lie. Ive been married twice but not to the Doctor. That was my idea, giving him a decent relationship to me. I thought youd ask too many questions otherwise. She giggled. I bet youre full of them now. Try one on me.

Is the Doctor real?

Have you read that book everyone was going on about? You know, the one with Big Brother, this character who no-ones ever seen? Does he exist in the same way you and I exist? Ill give you a clue. The Doctor lent me that book. He does exist.

Okay, I believe you. Time for the big one: Who put you up to this? And why?

I dont know why. All these questions. I like you, you know. When I told you this would be dangerous I meant that. I dont want you to get hurt.

Lechasseur looked back at Miranda-Emily with as much sympathy as he could muster, which was more than he expected. Please, tell me who youre working for.

Itll only confuse you.

Im already confused. If its not Walken, is it Mestizer?

No. she lied. Well, all right yes. It was Mestizer, but she didnt want me to talk to you. You know when I first saw you, you were so beautiful. They said you had an aura and I could see it and I fell in love with you there and then. I couldnt believe you were who they said you were. I wanted to warn you but… this idea just felt better. And now Ive gone behind her back and thats what Im afraid of because he cant do anything to protect me from her and you cant either.

He shook his head. Thats too much, youll have to start again.

She jumped off the bed, put her hands on his and pleaded with him through her eyes.

Yes, lets start again. Please, just go on doing the job I gave you. Thats real.

When you find the Doctor youll understand.

Lechasseur opened his mouth, unsure of what he was going to say.

And the balcony window exploded.

Lechasseur pulled Emily-Mirandas head into his coat and threw his free arm over his face to protect them both from the sudden rain of cutting shards. When he looked again lie saw a glistening sheen of glass dust down the back of Emilys blouse, but she didnt seem hurt. He turned to the window, to the eight-foot shape kicking out the edges of the hole it had just made. Abraxas was nearly too tall and too wide for the frame but he squeezed through.

Emily-Miranda leapt up and tore herself out of Lechasseurs grip. She pushed him aside and scrambled across the room in a dash for the back exit. Abraxas raised his hand and stabbed a huge leathery finger after her.

Miranda Sessions, Ive come to take to you to Mestizer

Lechasseur stepped in his way. Abraxas was seething with sound, a mechanical growl and hiss that Lechasseur had heard before but now it was much more pronounced, with anger, with activity. He must have come across the roof. Behind him the balcony creaked and collapsed in a

shower of dust.

For Gods sake, wait! yelled Lechasseur.

Abraxas swung an arm round and shoved Lechasseur aside with a casual force, with the impact of a metal bar. The mask and snout turned to Lechasseur, the glass eyes unreadable.

Do I look like the sort of man who cares what God thinks?

Emily scrambled for the door. Abraxas slid back the front of his coat and expelled two darts from the cavity of his chest. Emily squealed and slipped on her face in the dust, dark wounds erupting on her shoulder and her calf. She twitched but the darts dug into her, taut harpoon lines connecting them to Abraxas body. Lechasseur caught a glimpse under Abraxas leathery skin. There were faint lights around his chest, patches of metal gleaming. Armour? No, it was something writhing, breathing, something alive. Lechasseur snatched at the revolver on the bedside table.

Abraxas strode across the room, setting the walls and the dust shaking. He took the fallen Emily by the shoulders and in a simple effortless move he hoisted her off the ground, holding her tiny terrified face up to his. His proboscis twitched as he spoke, while she just gasped, gazing helplessly back at him.

We know you betrayed us. You offered your aid to our enemy

He made me do it. The words gasped out of her but her face darkened and she added: No, it was my choice. She tried to spit in his face but it came out as a thin splutter.

I dont know what Mestizer will do with you. She may want to make

you like me. Its not so bad. Am I really so horrible you cant bear to be like me? I am the steersman of the future

She quivered and shook her head.

Shell lie you on a bench and make an incision in your stomach. Shell scoop out your guts and fill you with glistening toys and youll see what youre really made of

Abraxas! Lechasseur howled but the Big Man ignored him so he stepped forward and put a first bullet into the creatures back. He could see where it struck, he saw the hole, but Abraxas didnt flinch.

Three more bullets. Each went into him and settled there. Irritated, Abraxas dropped Emily and she hit the floor with a helpless wheeze.

A high fifth shot went through Abraxas head and that didnt stop him. A little orange fluid bled from the wound, nothing more. He was unstoppable, he took Lechasseur by the shoulders, raised him off his feet and slammed him against the wall. The revolver and its last useless bullet was wrenched away. It hit the floor and slid across the dust to the far end of the room.

Abraxas glass eyes pushed close to his. Lechasseur saw the outline of a ruined face through steamed-glass eyes, skin and bone held together by fine metal stitches and clusters of wire.

I used to flinch from bullets. I remember how they used to hurt. Not any more

Over the huge brown shoulder, Lechasseur saw Emily stretch shakily for the gun.

Abraxas. Let him go. Thats all I ask. Let him go.

Then Emily Blandish-Miranda Sessions-Enid Cross jabbed the barrel of the gun into her open mouth and emptied the final chamber. She sat back easily, almost slumped, against the bloodied wall and didnt move again.

Lechasseurs anguished scream followed the sound of the shot.

Abraxas glanced over his shoulder.

Who am I to refuse the request of a lady?

Abraxas leaned towards Lechasseur, tapering leathery snout twitching

at his face. I believe that a truly weak man is one who cant protect his women

Lechasseur closed his eyes and saw nothing, no future, not even darkness. When he opened them, he was slumped on the floor, Abraxas was gone but the womans body was still crouched in the corner with her brains spread across the wall at her back.

That was the moment when Honoré Lechasseur gave up.

He left the scene before the police arrived. The balconys collapse, the shots, caused a commotion and he found it easy to slip away. There was no evidence that he had ever been there, no one who could identify him, nothing linking him to the scene but memories and he hoped he could forget those. As he made his escape he imagined he felt the baleful gaze of Walkens spy on his back but when he turned there was no-one there, just the flap of a black coat into the shadows. It didnt matter. He doubted Walken would try to use this against him. This was over.

He wished hed never heard of the Doctor or set out to find him. What had Syme called him? A hobgoblin? That seemed right. Maybe he was only an unreal folk figure, a fleshless idea that could be blamed for all the chaos and all the death. The Doctor, now he thought of it, just seemed a polite and nervous name for the Devil.

He went back to his flat and locked himself in. When Mrs Bag-of-Bones came for the rent he raised his voice at her for the first time since they had met. She went away disappointed, giving him the space he needed. She was a good woman but he didnt need company now.

At the weekend his next payment was delivered, by regular post. He put the unearned money on his table but couldnt bear to touch it, not even to burn it. There was a short note with the money, signed Emily Blandish. It read, simply: Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean. He put it on the fire.

He read newspaper reports of Mirandas death she was Miranda now, she could only be Emily while she was alive. The police werent certain if this was murder or suicide.

Some credulous witnesses were reporting a moving gargoyle, a Spring-Heeled Jack, seen climbing across the walls then the roofs of the nearby buildings, but no-one paid them much attention. The dead woman was said smugly to be in show business, as if no more explanation were needed.

The gun was never found. Lechasseur presumed Abraxas had taken it. Maybe Mestizer meant to blackmail him it was covered with his prints but if so he never heard from her. There were no more reports of the pink pyjama girl in the papers he saw, so he presumed she remained unkidnapped in the care of Mrs Beardsley.

He didnt want to think any more about the body hed left in the flat.

He spent too much time at home. He squatted on the bed with a bottle of vodka and a circle of postcards spread round his body, as if he could project himself through space and time just by concentrating on them.

He was letting himself go, as he had done after the explosion in Belgium. And he was back there, in the drawing room of the farmhouse with all the dead men and he could see their little lives bleeding out of them, the light pouring out of the joins of their bodies. He was the taciturn man of the platoon, the outsider. He stood at the windows watching the flashes of distant war in the night.

And the lieutenant sits at the piano boys, says he, things are about to get Germanic butBeethoven has been dead a century and is therefore neutral. And Private Lechasseur thinks Fifth Symphony and turns

dot dot dot dash

 the blast blows him through the window, his body fracturing as he passes through wood and glass, his bones fragmenting, his skin a suit of pain.

Back then hed had time and aid to heal. He couldnt deal with this the same way, not so quickly and not on his own. Now he was alone with the certainty that he would have to change again. Hed been a soldier, then a black marketeer, why shouldnt he shuck off his skin once more, remake himself as a new man?

He liked the idea of being a fixer.

Down these mean streets… No.

When he emerged at last it was to sell his hoard. Londons black economy wobbled with a sudden influx of cheap goods, undercutting the other spivs. Most of it went quickly. He destroyed everything he couldnt sell. He was left with too many bottles of cheap vodka so he climbed to the flat roof of a nearby warehouse and emptied them into the wind. For one day only it rained alcohol on London.

There were more A-bomb tests in the East. The vodka bottles were unlabelled, probably Russian. He smashed them one by one, not as a protest, but to make a garden of glass fragments on the roof. When the Soviets flew their bombers over London theyd see something abstract and beautiful in the few seconds before the city vanished into heat and light.

That night he fell asleep fully clothed and cross-legged on his bed. He didnt need to drink and he didnt dream. For once he slept soundly but was woken early in the morning by the crash from below. There were heavy feet tramping up the stairs. His eyes opened though not for long

 in time to see the masked gang break his door down and pile into the room around him.

5: SENSITIVE CRIMINALS

DOCTOR?

Hes still out cold.

He can hear us. I know he can.

Theyd chloroformed him and now there was a hard lump of blood on his tongue. He had little time to struggle, the gang had surrounded him and pinned his limbs while they pressed the pad over his mouth, but they hadnt hurt him. There was a hard streak of muscle at the base of his neck, from the awkward pose hed slept in. He was sure hed been moved, even with his eyes closed he didnt recognise his surroundings. The scent, the acoustics, were wrong. He had an impression of being underground. There was a warm dampness in the air but it tasted stuffy and enclosed, laced with a flowery perfume. He picked up two voices as he came round, one male and familiar, the other a shrill feminine tone. There was at least a third body present, he could hear rasped breathing that suited neither voice.

Hed been unconscious upright in a chair, upholstered, not uncomfortable though his arms were bound behind his back, pinning him in place. He flexed his wrists, slowly so as not to attract attention but there was no slack in the cord and making some would take time.

The taste of acid in his mouth was too strong. Lechasseur rolled his head to one side and spat at the floor.

Oh, yuck.

I think its beautiful. (The mans voice.) Can we get some of that in a jar?

How can you say its beautiful? (The woman it was her perfume he could smell, the scent of dry rotting flowers).

Its the product of a wholly exotic biology. Its like ectoplasm.

It just looks like sick and spit.

Hes telling us hes awake.

The aftertaste caught in his mouth, unshiftable. He inclined his head forward and opened his eyes. The light was red and pulsing behind his

eyelids, he fluttered them open but the glare was still hard, the revealed world looked queasy and unsettled. He smelt something smouldering, but it was in his mind. Lechasseur didnt get real headaches, not any more, and these disorientating moments of waking were the closest he came to reliving them.

His lips flickered like his eyes, his mouth almost too dry to make words.

Hei-Heil Hitler, he stammered.

You know, thats twice as amusing the second time around, said Eric Walken.

What does he mean? squeaked the girl. You didnt say anything about Hitler.

Im joking, Lechasseur mumbled. There was a movement at his feet. He glanced down through bleary eyes and saw another man on his knees, wrapping up discarded acid-spittle in a handkerchief. He was a big guy with cropped hair, a gorilla in evening dress. As Lechasseurs eyes settled on him he rose self-consciously and, at a nod from Walken, left the room, clutching his precious find in indelicate fingers. On his way, he looked back at the captive, then at Walken, with slow concerned eyes.

Dont worry, hes not going to hurt us, Walken told him.

I dont know, Lechasseur warned, the strength returning to his voice, he might.

He shrugged the pins-and-needles out of his body and made himself comfortable in the chair. He drew in his surroundings, a drab store in what he guessed was the Inferno club. The light was naked and electric, dangling on a flex from the ceiling, wasted on a room full of dust and boxes.

Walken was tuxedoed again, playing the club boss rather than the conjuror. He hadnt grown any taller since their last meeting, still the same powerful little man, poised like a solemn ape ready to spring. He stood swaying about a yard from the chair but seemed about ready to start bounding off the walls in a fit of pure energy.

His mistress, who looked all of nineteen, sat on a crate of black market champagne, swinging long legs to her own rhythm. Walken had dressed her in nostalgic tics, white fur and pearls, elegant grey elbow-

length gloves, she looked like a gangsters moll from the 1920s or a silent movie star. She was heart-faced and wide-eyed, a little too starved to be truly elegant. She had a bag of toffees on her lap that seemed to hold her attention more closely than anything in the room around her. She smiled at Lechasseur from under blonde curls but their eyes didnt meet.

Walken said: I apologise for the method we had to use to bring you here. I had some trouble tracking you down after our last meeting, time is as you know of the essence, and you have a reputation as someone who isnt easily persuaded. Im sorry.

Its stopped hurting. I still cant move my arms.

Walken seemed poised to move forward to untie his prisoner but he checked himself. He didnt want to come close, to touch him. He was holding in all his spirit, all his natural aggression, from fear, almost from awe. Whatever it was it gave Lechasseur a little leverage over the situation. Walken was deferring to him, even the girl could sense that. She chewed toffee and kicked and swapped perplexed glances between the two men.

Not until were each of us clear about what the other wants. Walken flashed his empty palms at him, a peace gesture, nothing up my sleeve. Im a cautious man, Im sorry, but Im also a reasonable one.

Lechasseur offered him a sour, contemptuous smile.

Walken coughed. Our last meeting didnt go well, so shall we start again? I havent introduced myself properly. My name is Eric Walken, Im the owner of this club. I am the most powerful human being alive on this planet today. I know you must think thats a small thing, a very tiny thing, but still I am he clapped his hands together honoured to be here talking with you.

Lechasseur sat in silent pause before replying: Who do you think I am?

Walken nodded. Youre the Doctor.

It would be a mistake, Lechasseur knew, to laugh.

Im not the Doctor, he said quietly. He watched Walken shift his weight from one foot to the other, the face an untroubled mask but the body twitching with uncertainty and impatience. Walken pushed his hands and eyes as close to his prisoner as he dared. He wasnt simply looking, he was drawing an impression through all his senses,

through his face and skin. Lechasseur felt himself being read.

Walken snapped back, stung, fear flickering over his face before he recovered his composure.

Theres no mistake. You are the Doctor.

Lechasseur shook his head wearily. Someone asked me to find him, thats my connection to him, but Im not him. Who told you I was?

I can tell. Almost from the moment I saw you, I knew it was you. Walken thrust his arms outwards, stabbing his shaped fingers at his captive, pulling them short of contact. His hands described a sigil in front of Lechasseurs face, his chest, it would have looked impressive on stage with the right lighting creating the flaming shape in the air. You have a distinct aura. No human has an aura like that, not even Crowley or Hanussen, and they were among the greatest magicians in the history of our species. I didnt see it at first how could I? but when I did I knew. Its your signature, you bind time with it. You are the Doctor.

Out of toffees, Walkens skinny moll craned forward to look for Lechasseurs aura and cooed in mock delight when she couldnt. Lechasseur felt his mouth tighten in a smile and watched Walkens left cheek tic.

He thinks Im toying with him.

He had no idea how Walken would react to anything he said. The conjuror was totally immersed in his fantasy. Maybe it was time to try on the Doctors skin for size.

You know, if Id only known I was the Doctor all along it would have saved me a lot of hard work, he said, airily. I was searching in all the wrong places.

Walken gave a snort of laughter and his real voice broke though and his body relaxed with the weight of pretence gone. Doctor, you arrogant sod, dyou really think you could fool me?

Lechasseur cocked his head sideways, smiling prim and silent.

Now, I cant think why youve chosen to incarnate as a Negro or God forbid as an American, but shrug your ways are not ours. And Im just having fun with you.

We searched you while you were unconscious. You know what we found?

Lechasseur shook his head.

Walken dipped into his pocket and pulled out as though it were a string of coloured handkerchiefs a length of chain and a dangling key. Lechasseur remembered Emily passing it to him in the envelope, the warm brush of her hand on his.

Your key, the one that opens your cabinet of light. Do you know where it is?

Lechasseur shook his head again.

Mestizer has it, Im sure, but I dont know where. That golem, that patchwork prosthetic Abraxas, is working for her but Im sure you know that. Youve met Mestizer? He assumed a yes. Now we have the key we can steal it back from her. Ive arranged a gathering for this evening, see if we can force a materialisation right here in the club. Those idiots in California thought their botched Moonchild rite was the magical event of the 20th century. Typical Hollywood occultists really pulp hacks and rocket-men treating the Devil like its something Abbott and Costello could meet. Well, sod them. The big event is right here tonight in London.

And if that doesnt work we can always head up to her place and burn it down.

The girl was clapping, she was making fun of them, but Walken didnt notice or care.

His eyes were soaring up through a world only he could see. He was enraptured.

Lechasseur squashed his hands, trying to slip loose of his bonds, but they held.

Everything was unclear now, he had no visions to fall back on, nothing but darkness behind his eyes. He would have to go where Walken led.

Walken was living in his own delusional world of patchwork men and goblin Doctors and Lechasseur knew he was in danger of being sucked in. It was only that overheard remark of Walkens that convinced him the Doctor was a living man in the first place.

Ruefully, he realised that Walken must have been talking about him all along. The elusive Doctor slipped away, unreal again.

The conjuror came out of his reverie to look at his mistress. She ruffled herself, both self-conscious and glad of the attention. She was, Lechasseur guessed, part-hypnotised. Her eyes werent focused quite as they should be. They were fixed on nothing.

This is Amber, Walken told him.

Eric! Thats not my real name, she piped in.

Shell be the medium for tonights ceremony I hope you approve. If things go well, Ill give her to you. I know you never travel alone. What would the Doctor be without his amanuenses?

Amber pouted, believing shed been called something rude, but was sensible or mesmerised enough to keep quiet. Walken sent her out to fetch some assistance for the Doctor. She went obediently, kicking the dust up with her heels.

Walken produced a penknife and set to work on Lechasseurs bonds. The conjurors mix of deference and revulsion was suddenly more dangerous for being invisible and out of sight. The blade brushed Lechasseurs skin without cutting it.

Cant you do this by magic?

I wouldnt waste it. I must insist you stay at the club until the ceremony is complete. I know youre thinking about escaping. You could take the key, approach Mestizer on your own, take back your stolen cabinet without my help. I wouldnt advise it.

I wouldnt do that, we seem to be on the same side.

Oh, no Doctor, I think thats exactly the sort of thing you would do. But I have plans of my own and the ceremony is going ahead tonight, with or without you. If I dont have your key then Ill find another focus for my magic. I could bring in that pink pyjama girl youre so fond of, cut her open and consult her entrails. Shes the ace up my sleeve.

The knife went through the cord, which slipped loose to the floor.

Ill stay to keep an eye on you, Lechasseur promised.

Walken leant over his shoulder, so close he could feel the warmth of his skin and his mouth. Doctor, he whispered, I knew you wouldnt let me down.

The assistance proved to be three waitresses from the club. They moved mechanically and said little unless they were directly addressed. Their pupils were hard and black, the life drained out of them. Unlike Amber they were completely under Walkens spell. I have conquered biology, he boasted. I could order their hearts to stop beating and the blood to dry up in their veins, and it would, but theyd still go on as though nothing were wrong. My will animates them.

Lechasseur nodded sceptically. Maybe Mestizer could do it, he could imagine that.

The waitresses followed him everywhere for the rest of the day. They treated him as a guest, not a prisoner, but even so they were guards. They didnt look strong but he could imagine Walken could order them to tear his arms out if he tried to escape. He let them tend to him, though his flesh crept when they stared at him with their lifeless eyes. He couldnt look at their faces.

Walken stayed out of his way for much of the day, claiming that he had the ceremony to arrange, but Lechasseur could sense fear and suspicion under his mask of admiration. He didnt want to sit at the Doctors feet, picking up scraps of wisdom.

His idea of the Doctor was flexible enough to absorb anything that Lechasseur said or did. He had no fixed assumptions about the Doctors behaviour or characteristics.

Lechasseur became Doctorish without having to act, without even claiming the title.

He ate dinner in the cavernous body of the Inferno club, watching the stagehands putting together the scenery for the evenings cabaret. The lighting was white and ordinary. It revealed the seediness of the club, its threadbare painted walls, grimy floors, air hung with stale cigarette smoke from the previous nights audience. The glamour was gone. Walken came in to inspect the stage, didnt see his guest at first.

Lechasseur had been eating quietly but he finished his mouthful and called out: Getting ready for tonights performance?

Walken hummed. There wont be a magic show tonight, not for the paying public. He struggled up onto the stage, looking suddenly like

an impatient little boy. He turned to look out across the club at Lechasseur, his hands dug into his pockets. You really are a riddle wrapped in an enigma inside a mystery. I never know what to expect from you.

You must have tried to imagine what Id be like?

Oh yes. Ive heard such wonderful contradictory stories about you. My godfather met you in Dublin during the Rising. You were a white man then and older. You wrote Poor Toms dialogue in King Lear, Ive seen your handwriting in the first draft. You are Tom oBedlam, you are the king-in-patchwork, you are the flickering unman who never was.

I must be a real disappointment.

No, not yet. I dont understand you yet.

What about Mestizer? I havent got a handle on her. Who is she?

Walken shrugged. The dark lady, he said, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction: He pouted, glancing down at his feet and blowing sour air out through pursed lips. When he looked up, he said, Theres something Im sure youve worked out. I should tell you for the sake of fair play.

Yes?

If I can find a way to kill you, I will do it, he droned, but even if I let you live youll never be the Doctor again.

I dont get it.

When weve fixed Mestizer, Ill have your cabinet. Im going to steal it from you.

And once I have it, Ill be the Doctor and youll be nobody. Youll never have existed. Ill take your cabinet and make you mundane. I wont let anyone take her from me, not as easily as you did. I will have all your powers and all your knowledge and all your light, but when Im you, Doctor, I wont waste them like you did. He blew again, bored. Just thought I should warn you.

Well see, Lechasseur called, chewing on this thought as he chewed on his food.

Walken, dejected, shambled off the stage. He was a volatile man,

given to moods.

For the rest of the day, Lechasseur was kept isolated, even as evening drew in and he heard the first patrons arriving for the cabaret. For all their zombie scariness, the waitresses took good care of him, even tending to the bruises he still wore from his encounter with Abraxas. He wondered if Walken had also ordered them to kill him, when the time arose. No, hed do that himself. He still had a street-kid arrogance that demanded he do his own dirty work. Besides, they had to get through the ceremony first.

It began shortly after eight. Music and applause were rising from the basement space when the waitresses took him to Walkens inner sanctum, the room adjacent to his office on the first floor. Hed had a glimpse of this on his last visit, now he saw it all. It was an odd-shaped room, with its corners boxed-off in a doomed attempt to make it seem circular. It was decorated in sober creams and dark greens, a little oasis of opulence in the decrepit club, and as a flourish Walken had decorated it with scarlet banners bearing occult symbols. The swastika was there, with others. A large window along the far wall gave the same dismal view of the backyard as the office, spoiling the effect.

He was the last guest to arrive. There were twelve already in the room, including Walken and Amber. He didnt recognise any of the others, men or women, but most of them gave off that peculiar British scent, class. Walken rose from his seat to introduce the Doctor and a ripple of approval passed round the table. Lechasseur felt the mood transform as Walken captured the admiration of his betters. They were a sorry bunch, shabby even in their evening dress. The faces of one or two gave away the same feral tenacity that Lechasseur saw in Walken but most had pale, frightened faces. They were the dying old order, theyd probably turned to the supernatural out of fear of extinction.

Walken introduced his guests but Lechasseur took in few names. They would turn up in the papers over the next week as individual tragedies for their great families.

Walken indicated Lechasseur should sit in the empty chair between Amber and a young fop who introduced himself as Clute (Another name for the devil, doncha know?). The table was circular but as far as it could have been said to have had a head, it was Amber, the medium, not the magician. After the initial ruffle of interest in the Doctor, the circles eyes went back to her. Walken sat almost forgotten to her right, Lechasseur to her left. She was dwarfed by the big leather

chair and sat stiffly with a hypnotised gloss over her eyes. There was a small ornamental dagger through her left palm, the point jutting from the back of her hand. The wound was puckered but unbleeding.

A demonstration, Walken intoned, the magicians voice, that I have put Amber into a deep trance. Ill forgo the other tests Id planned, as we have ladies present.

Amber took the dagger with her free hand and slid it loose. She set it down clean in front of her. The tabletop was varnished, the same rich brown as Lechasseurs skin.

The inauguration of the cabinet will take the form of a séance, Walken continued.

We will link hands. We will be alone. We will not break the circle. The medium will chant but only I shall speak. I hope this is understood.

Nods of agreement from round the table, Lechasseur agreeing warily. Walken waved the three waitresses away and they turned out the lights as they left. With the doors closed, the room was sunk into a moments darkness; in the dark Lechasseur felt Clute grasp his left hand and he wrapped his right around Ambers cold, unmoving fingers.

Then the candles at the centre of the table flared, another Walken trick. The yellow light flickered on Ambers pale face, against the white skin of her shoulders, on the Doctors key that she wore as a necklace.

Her lips moved. She began to chant, guttural moans separated by long pauses.

Lechasseur realised she was intoning Mary Had a Little Lamb, syllable by syllable. He snorted.

Thank you, Doctor. Walken was wide-eyed, his pupils full of candlelight. Many of the others had their eyes closed, afraid of the dark. The chant is only a focus. We are linked. Youll feel the power flowing soon. Were free of these bodies. Were rising over London. Were flying in the bodies of the pigeons, searching with our bird-eyes for the cabinet of light.

Now Walken mentioned it, there was a buzz, passing between Clutes flesh and his flesh and Ambers. Walken gasped, breathing hard.

I can feel the wind and hear the beat of my wings. We are carried north. We see the radiant city spread out beneath us, we see the mundane glimmer and are not fooled.

The true light was brought into this mundane world by the pretender-god. He spoke the words and there was light, given to his mechanism, his subjects and his descendants.

The cabinet is a vessel, built to hold the light. She is an anchor into other worlds and we see her as a shaft of true light. We see.

Lechasseur could see. He saw it glowing in the night, a blotch floating over the centre of the table, a gouge of brightness in the air. Light isnt white, Lechasseur realised giddily, but a smear of all colours. The blotch was the shape of a malformed hand and his heart thumped, realising he could see himself through it. It wasnt in the room, the room was inside it.

Walken wheezed laughter. Thats Mestizers house. That unbelievable shameless bitch! Shes had it hidden there all along! Give Amber your strength, we can take it now!

Amber chanted harder, her hands shook and Lechasseur could feel the stab wound under his fingers. It was flowing now, but not much. The buzz came again, this time like a knife through the heart. One of the women in the circle coughed her guts out onto the floor, a rank bloody smell, but her hand held tight; one of the men was screaming but his voice sounded isolated and faraway. Amber chanted. The key at her neck was white-hot.

Its coming! Walken gasped, his eyes swimming with triumph.

Over the sound of the chant and the cabaret they heard the roar of engines, ancient machinery struggling back to life. Their wheeze and their groan filled the darkness.

They bellowed, not engines but something alive, a mothers mouth twisting as she gave birth, a baby a girl erupting into the world screaming before she could breathe.

Lechasseur looked into the light, which grew larger, and saw the shape of the newborn. It was a cabinet, as Walken said, a tall blue box with a drab, oddly familiar outline. The light swirled round it as it phased in and out. The blotch swelled ripe, ready to burst, ready to spill its contents into the room.

There was a crash from the basement, shots and the first explosion. Amber snatched her hands free. The light imploded, sucking the vision of the blue box into the darkness. The candles snuffed out. Lechasseur felt the energy from the stance snap through him, he grabbed the chair to steady himself. One man wasnt so lucky, the invisible blast blew him back out of his chair and sent him staggering against the door, which creaked open. Another slumped lifelessly forward on the table. Lechasseur felt an empty shock then saw the same on the faces of the other occultists. Only cold immobile Amber seemed unaffected. The key winked and shone on her chest.

More rattling gunshots from downstairs, yells, then screams. Automatic weapons, Lechasseur guessed. That and the explosion suggested a hit rather than random violence. He stood uneasily.

Walken had gone quiet after contact was broken, but he looked up suddenly, a vicious line on his mouth. He began to pound his fists on the table.

Amber! he screamed. We had the cabinet! We lost it! How could you do this to me?!

She took the dagger gently in her palms. You had nothing, she told him in her flat trance-drone. You never will. She swung round to put the dagger into his chest, then sat back patiently in her chair.

Walken shifted before the blow hit and took it in the shoulder. Maybe that was the moment when he finally conceded that Mestizer was the better hypnotist. Lechasseur didnt want to stay to find out. He turned to the door in time to see the waitresses reappear, their eyes still hollow, their hands now full. The man whod struck the door struggled to his feet and shrank back but the closest girl put two clean bullets through his forehead.

Lechasseur turned from the door and ran for the window. The yells from below had died down but the shooting continued in short brutal bursts. Walkens goons were probably mounting a defence but the attackers sounded better equipped and had surprise on their side. Behind him the waitresses were finishing the occultists with efficient double taps.

The window could be pushed open but there was no easy way down he could see. There were a number of cars parked in the yard, large ones with long solid black roofs. He could risk a jump, they werent going anywhere and might take his weight. There was a drawback, the

Silver Ghost sitting in the alley, the eight foot figure at its door, his obvious silhouette inadequately disguised by a broad brimmed hat. Someone was watching from the open window of the back seat. Lechasseur couldnt see clearly, but he guessed Mestizer.

In the window glass he saw Ambers reflection behind him as she rose leisurely, a small ladies pistol in her hand pointed at the back of his head. The key was still on her neck but hed lost that now, he had no use for it. Ambers finger squeezed. He shoved at the window and leapt.

The bullet went over his head but the sound of it made Abraxas whirl. The Big Man was cradling a large machine-gun, of the make it took three ordinary men to carry. With a glance at his passenger, he turned and brought it to bear on the figure falling from the window.

Lechasseur crashed onto the roof of the nearest car and struggled for a footing. The jolt went through his body, undoing all the good work Walkens assistants had done for his bruises. He didnt have time to climb down, he hurled himself forward onto the roof of the next car, buying himself a little time before Abraxas could change his aim. He pounded forward and threw himself into the gap between the second car and the back gate. Abraxas was blind behind them. A shot pinged into the gates from above, Amber still had him covered but she was a rotten shot. He hurled himself into the alley and ran as hard and as fast away from the club as he could manage.

There was another blast behind him, filling the night sky with light and smoke. The shock knocked him onto the floor. The stones were cold and wet, but London was suddenly hotter than he remembered. It was raining flecks of ash and flaming wood. He looked round in time to see the fireball rise through the roof of the building. The windows were smeared red and yellow. The Inferno was burning.

The blast had knocked Abraxas down too. That bought him enough time, if he could just find the strength to get up. The hand, black and gloved, was thrust at him from the dark. Lechasseur took it automatically and the newcomer pulled him up.

This way, he said, thumbing at the alley. There was soot smeared across his face and his coat was burning faintly where the embers had touched it. He turned and ran and Lechasseur pelted after him, a bitter sensation in his mouth. His rescuer was Walkens spy from Shoreditch, the one whod been preparing to grab Emily so the magician could study her entrails.

Behind him, Abraxas was up and firing wildly. The spy crouched in the shadows as he ran that was sensible and Lechasseur followed suit. Walken was almost certainly dead and his man was no threat Abraxas was the immediate danger. The air seemed full of the rattle of exploding bullets, they rang like bells, then he realised they were bells. The fire engines of half the West End were probably bearing towards Covent Garden after the blast.

Ive finished with this, he yelled at the dark back ahead of him. I dont want anything more to do with it! But apart from a low wordless murmur there was no answer. The other man led him through the alleys and the shadows further away from the club, though the fire soared across the skyline, like a landmark, turning it an unhealthy pink. Every night in London was once like this. Every night.

Walkens spy stopped him by a burned out site. A whole section of alley had come down here, a line of shops that were lost forever under rubble. He stabbed his finger at a crack in the side of the wreck, a narrow hole leading down into the darkness of the buried building. Through here, he said bluntly.

Lechasseur shook his head and made to go on but the man grabbed hisshoulder and pushed him back.

Mestizers gang are going to be searching this part of London for the next hour at least. If they find you, theyll kill you. Youre safer with me.

Lechasseur shook his head wearily.

Youre hurt, you wont get far.

I can try.

Exasperation filled the soot-covered face. His rescuer turned to the crumbling brick pile and slapped it in frustration. Then he turned back to Lechasseur and offered him a clear-eyed, hard-faced appeal. He held his arms out, palms solemnly displayed.

Trust me, he said. Im a doctor.

6: TRICKS OF THE DEVIL

ISNT IT FUNNY, THE DOCTOR REMARKED, HOW YOUR LIVING SPACE, EVEN SOMEWHERE

you lay your head for a few days, gradually begins to resemble you? As if youre mapping the contents of your head onto your surroundings.

Funny peculiar? asked Lechasseur.

No, the other kind of funny. You get anguished because somethings fallen down or out of place, or the dusts building up on the shelves you never bother to clean.

Then, just when youre about to burst with frustration, you see the joke and you laugh, you cant help yourself, it pours out of you. Thats the human condition. So Im told, he added darkly.

The Doctor had been living under the heaps of rubble a short distance from Covent Garden. It had been a toyshop once, now there were flowers growing in green clumps from the ceiling. The surviving room must have been a basement store or repair space.

Marionettes hung from a rack on the far wall, their strings frayed, their skins flaking, their carnival clothes stained with mould. Weed fronds crept silently down to strangle them. The vegetable patches were speckled with flowers, Blitz-daisies nourished on blood and fire. Most flowers strained upwards to the light, these subsisted on darkness.

Lechasseur had expected the climb down to be dank and cramped but the crack widened and the Doctor pointed out the fractured but steady steps down to his hiding place.

The store was at the bottom and there were lights twinkling in the subterranean gloom. The Doctor moved familiarly through the dark to his candles, lighting them with a match that hed pinch out, then reignite, without it ever burning down. He tossed an empty matchbook to Lechasseur, who plucked it casually out of the air without taking his eyes from his host.

He held the book up to read the label, through the corners of his eyes.

PROMETHEAN EVERLASTING MATCHES

A PRODUCT OF THE ETERNITY PERPETUAL COMPANY

What a wonderful idea, what terrible business sense, the Doctor declared.

He didnt live in the workshop but in a narrow room to the side. He had some sort of water arranged for the place as he disappeared within and emerged minutes later with a clean, shiny face and a sloshing kettle for tea. He offered Lechasseur the chance to clean up but met with a wary, stone-eyed response. He asked to check Lechasseurs wounds but Lechasseur felt grimy and only a little tender and declined. The Doctor put his everlasting match to a gas stove and set the kettle boiling.

Lechasseur barely said a word in those first few minutes but drew in his surroundings. He tried to imagine what the store had been like before the bombs closed it. He remembered childhood shops as being colourful, untouchable treasure troves and felt unsettled by how faded the memory seemed. This room was the opposite of a toyshop. It was the backstage of the doll theatre, their dreamspace, their afterlife. Everything here was broken or incomplete. A shelf of naked china dolls gazed down at him, their glass eyes unblinking, their bodies sexless and smooth.

There were the marionettes with their rotted faces. There was an ornamental clock, its front prised open, its cuckoo snapped off at the spring. Teddy-bears, furless and scorched, were mouldering in a corner. The light hed seen as hed first entered this room was a luminous glisten from the skins of dead toys.

There were larger objects that, if theyd been whole, would have been beyond the dreams and piggy-banks of all but the richest London children. Lifelike uniforms on mannequins, nurses and soldiers mainly; rocking horses; cars big enough to fit a small-bodied driver; an old-fashioned steam train, like the ones that first crossed America; and there was the Ferris wheel. It stood five feet in diameter and was resting on a workbench in the middle of the room, almost touching the ceiling. Apart from the black dirt that had accumulated since this room was last in use, there didnt seem to be anything wrong with it. Before the Doctor retreated to the other room he gave it a tap and set

it spinning. The wheel went round and round and never stopped.

The Doctor claimed he had been repairing it during his hours of boredom, but Lechasseur didnt trust a word he said. And he used a lot of words, he was in love with them. He had the gift of the gab.

His other hobby since arriving in London had been researching the history of his hideout. He and Lechasseur sat facing each other on rickety chairs with the Ferris wheel at their side. The Doctor crouched on his seat, his legs drawn up into a squat as if trying to make a smaller man of himself. He held his mug in both hands, like a soup bowl. Lechasseur also had a mug. It seemed easier just to accept one than argue.

The tea tasted foul.

Until it was bombed, this shop was owned by a man called Sun. Its always been run by a Mr Sun, as far back as local history recalls. The first Mr Sun seems to have arrived here from China in the mid-18th century and set up his business on arrival.

Possibly he inherited it from someone else and Ive found it impossible to trace whos actually owned the place in the last two hundred years.

Each Mr Sun appears to have been a stooped man, maybe only middle-aged, prematurely old but never ageing. Even if the shop was passed down through the generations, this is still a bit of a mystery. All the Mr Suns were thoroughly Anglicised and never dressed up to suit orientalist fads. They all seem to have enjoyed the company of children.

One woman I spoke to, who is now in her nineties but grew up round here, remembers the Mr Sun of her childhood inviting the street children into the shop, rich and poor alike, for parties. There would be food, magic and other entertainment and the children would all come away with small toys as gifts. She also recalls that a later Mr Sun was imprisoned during the Great War, not because he was a foreigner but because one day in 1915 he took a train to Hove and shot dead, for no readily apparent reason, a professor of economics who later turned out to have been spying for the Austrians.

I also spoke to a woman who met the most recent Mr Sun in 1938. They were intimates.

He told her that he had a dishonourable ancestor in ancient China. This earliest Mr Sun had been a betrayer, a spy and a poisoner of

wells. He was captured, imprisoned and sentenced to death. The night before his execution, a man came to his cell, a stranger, an occidental who promised to help him escape in exchange for an unspecified favour. If they hadnt made this deal, there would have been no Mr Suns in London, no toyshop at all.

The last Mr Sun walked out of his shop one evening six years ago and was never seen again. Thats nothing unusual in wartime. The shop was bombed a week later, again not unusual. According to local legend, the shop would sometimes disappear. Youd go to the door and find the whole façade vanished with nothing but a brick wall in its place as if it had never been there at all. And one day in 1943, it really wasnt.

I dont know who Mr Sun was but he sounds like a remarkable man, the Doctor concluded. He put down his mug. Somehow he had managed to drain it without Lechasseur ever seeing him drink. Lechasseur set his own mug down and addressed him.

For a while, he said, not sure of what words were going to come, I thought you were just a hoax. I didnt think you were real at all.

The Doctor brought his hands together, a hard solid clap. He was smiling slightly, fussily. The lips would almost have smirked if the eyes werent so pained. Hed shed coat, hat and muffler while washing and emerged in a soft black velvet smoking jacket and pristine white shirt. The collar was loose, exposing a narrow neck, a pronounced throat. His features were large but not thick, quite the opposite, very graceful and aquiline. His hairline was receding, revealing an expansive dome over a face given to sly frowns and flashes of confusion. He wasnt a tall man and without the disguising bulk of his coat, he was gangly.

He wasnt at all what Lechasseur had expected.

The wound of his face wasnt visible, not like any other damaged man Lechasseur knew, but when he closed his eyes the scars he wore under his skin were clear. His wounds had burned, they were ancient smouldering things. Lechasseur couldnt see much about this mans life, there was too much space and time inside his body. He saw the Doctor, both much older and much younger, handing a burning briar to the naked hairy heavy-browed cavewoman, a smug-worried smile on his mouth. His fingers were faintly scorched by the fire.

In the dark, the Doctor had lit his everlasting match and put it to a

cigarette. He offered it to Lechasseur then drew it to his own mouth when it was refused.

Are you sure? Improves your singing voice. To tell the truth, the last time I smoked I was a whole other man. But right now I have a body with cravings. His eyes lost focus and his voice softened into a reverie. I remember visiting the city by the bay, meeting a woman in black, a beautiful lady with no pity. Then someone shot me and thats what made me the man I am today. Im hazy on the details, Mr Lechasseur, my memories arent fixed in time in the same way as yours. Or may I call you Honoré?

Lechasseur nodded before he realised what he was being asked.

He wasnt tired but he ached. He had sat restlessly through the Doctors story of Mr Sun, impatience gathering like silt at the base of his spine, but the Doctors easy manner was relaxing even as it irritated him. The Doctor wasnt like Walken or Mestizer. He didnt need hypnosis. He was genuinely disarming. Besides…

There had been the hand thrust out in the alley, pulling him up when he was down. He owed this man some polite time for that, whoever he really was.

He coughed. What I mean is, Ive heard a lot about you. The Doctor is this. The Doctor does that. Ive been told to stay away from the Doctor and Ive been told I am the Doctor. You say youre the Doctor, the real thing, but Im not sure I should believe you.

The Doctor tapped his head politely. Anyone who claims to be me but isnt is sick in here. His hand went into his watch pocket and pulled something out. The candlelight caught it and set it shining. Recognise this? he asked.

Swinging hypnotically on its chain was the key the false Emily had given him.

Amber had that, Lechasseur said cautiously. How did you get it?

This is my copy. Amber and now Mestizer I imagine has the spare. The key went back in his pocket. Ill need that later tonight. Actually, Ill let you inspect it if youre still not sure. Didnt Miranda tell you wed be able to recognise each other with the key? Not that I ever needed help recognising you.

You were spying on me.

Ive kept an eye on you whenever Ive had the chance. I dont get out of here a lot.

Mestizer has been combing London for me over the past few weeks. She has agents everywhere, many of whom dont even know who theyre working for. Its a sinister way to operate. Ive had to lie low.

How did Miranda get the key? Lechasseur rapped.

I gave it to her. That reminds me He rose suddenly and slipped through the side door, returning moments later with a revolver held gingerly in his fist. Lechasseur tensed, ready to throw himself to one side, but the Doctor let it go, expelling it from his hand as though it were diseased. It clattered down on the table at the base of the Ferris wheel, its barrel aimed towards a rank of tin soldiers.

Never let it be said that I dont carry guns, the Doctor said, trying to sound breezy but with a genuine twinge of disgust on his face. They lend authority to moral argument, in the right hands, he added but he didnt sound convinced.

Lechasseur recognised it. Thats Mirandas.

The Doctor nodded and resumed his seat opposite. With his hands free, his props all vanished, he suddenly seemed larger and more dangerous. He saw what Lechasseur was thinking and said: Thats right, Honoré. Im a Holy Terror. I am what fear itself is frightened of. Im the sleep of reason. So Im told, but I cant keep up with what I am most of the time.

He had big hands, not rough or powerful or crude or clumsy, just big.

I took the gun before the police arrived, he explained, and Lechasseur imagined those hands gently easing the revolver from Mirandas mouth. They have a record of your prints and that would only complicate matters.

Miranda thought you would protect her, Lechasseur said quietly, though still loud enough for the man opposite to hear. She killed herself because you didnt.

The Doctor shook his head and couldnt look him in the eye. Is that what happened?

She didnt trust me enough. She should have let Abraxas take her prisoner. I couldve got her out again. Im good at that. Oh, oh dear, he

finished, and it was a pathetic thing to hear coming from his lips.

It was you, wasnt it? Lechasseur said, stabbing with the sound of his voice.

Miranda was working for you when she hired me.

The Doctor nodded but said nothing.

So, I was hired to track down the Doctor by the Doctor?

Thats right.

Wasnt there anything better you could spend your money on?

I never meant for you to find me. The way you searched, what you turned up, that was the important thing. You were already involved. Mestizers agents had identified you.

They were planning to bring you in.

Why?

They mistook you for me.

Lechasseur gazed into the doleful white face of the Doctor, at the clean shaven chin and lip, at the slick thinning brown hair that had turned gold in the candlelight, at the deceptive heaviness of his face. The man was smoking again, the same cigarette returned to his mouth as though hed had it simply slipped away in his pocket.

Its like looking in a mirror, Lechasseur said.

I dont mean physically, the Doctor replied, his head shivering from side to side.

You have an aura that resembles mine. Not to the trained eye, it wouldnt have fooled Mestizer for a minute if shed set eyes on you. But it was enough to trick Walken and Mestizers agents.

Lechasseur reached lazily for the gun, pulling it off the table and into his lap. The blood rushed out of his hand as he touched it, numbing uselessly. The blood flowed back, pins-and-needles prickling inside his trigger finger.

The Doctor adjusted his poise in the chair, where he crouched like a Puck. Like Walken his body was a barely-sealed container, twitching

and ready for release, but while the conjuror was reining in a violent energy, the Doctor was holding back something else, something more abstract. Different shapes, different voices, different versions of himself. Lechasseur felt coolly sympathetic. He could understand that.

He had a sudden mental image of the Doctor, Mestizer and Walken as a family, husband, wife and damaged son. He saw them as if it were a photograph, sepia and faded so that the Doctors face was now almost obscured. They were an unholy trinity. It was a persuasive image but he knew it wasnt true.

So whats so special about my aura?

The Doctor fixed him with a devilish grin. You have dreams where you can see the past and the future as if they were there in front of you. Sometimes you dip into your memories and change them. You have premonitions you know you can thwart. Youre a time sensitive, Honoré. You have a unique perspective on the physics of the world.

One day youll look at a woman and think shes going to die in 1926 and 1951 or at a man and see him in four dimensions, as a flesh-worm extending continuously from cradle to grave.

And this is how you see things?

He shook his head. No, not me. Im the opposite. I face time the other way. I see snapshots. He whistled suddenly and said, Your aura is like mine, but inverted, so it honestly is like looking in a mirror. Half the time sensitives Ive met are clinically insane, by the way.

And the other half? His fizzing hand was on the gun now, warily.

Theyre bitter, cynical people. They look at the flesh-worm and think thats all there is. Then they start to think that it doesnt matter if the worm lives or dies.

Its just a worm, like any other. Itll stop moving and decay and go into the ground.

They cant let people into their lives, thats their trouble.

Thanks for the warning, Lechasseur said. He was smiling faintly. Time sensitive, the idea rolled round pleasingly inside his skull. I had a doctor once another doctor tell me that.

Really? Then Im your second opinion.

Lechasseur nodded. He was sitting in the hospital again, in his smock and wheelchair.

It was the moment when hed been trundled out to meet the head-shrinking Dr Paterson for the first time, his eyes full of sullen hostility, those he met full of genial intelligence. He couldnt breathe, the air was gone. He felt physically propelled back to the hospital, slipped back in time through his memories. Then he snapped back to the present, to the dead toyshop and the Doctor.

He coughed, the gun trembling faintly in his hand. The Doctor was watching him thoughtfully, waiting for him to speak, so he said: Who was Mestizers agent, the one who identified me?

Does it matter? It does matter, Lechasseur said. You know I have this revolver pointing at your chest. I can put a bullet through your heart.

The Doctor jiggled his head enthusiastically. Assuming that the guns loaded.

Theres only two ways you can find out: take a chance and pull the trigger; or open the chamber and give me the opportunity to grab it from you. Thats a horrible image, dont you think? Two grown men grappling for a gun in a toyshop.

Lechasseur shrugged. Would it make a difference if I shot you dead now? Youve caused enough trouble. Your body might never be discovered. The candles would burn out I dont think theyre everlasting and Id leave you dead in the dark.

The Doctor climbed down from his chair and turned away, presenting his back as a big blank target. You see what I mean about bitter and cynical. You wont shoot me, though I know you can. I think you have a sense of natural justice. I saw that when you left Mrs Beardsleys. You came out of that door with such a look on your face.

Brute empathy, thats what they call it. Ive never seen such compassion.

As the Doctor spoke, Lechasseur span open the barrel of the revolver and found a bullet tucked into each of the six chambers. He pushed it closed then slid the gun back onto the table. He didnt make a sound but the Doctors shoulders sagged.

How about we just pretend Im pointing a gun at you?

The Doctor turned, revealing a hard humourless smile. He perched back on his chair, hunched still and squinting like a bony-limbed gargoyle. Miranda Sessions was Mestizers spy. She mistook you for me. Then after shed identified you to Mestizer she had a change of heart. That was when I went to her with my plan. You were already involved, you had to be, and I wanted to set you on the offensive. And its worked. You confused Mestizers agents and gave me cover to move around freely. You distracted Walken and you drew Mestizer out into the open early. She gave away her entire hand tonight. Poor Miranda.

And you suggested she use the name Emily Blandish? Just another clue to point you in the right direction. So he shrugged you just wanted me to stir up trouble? I was a patsy?

The Doctor shook his head. All of what you did has helped me, a lot, and I am grateful but Ive had something else in mind for you from the start.

Yeah?

Youre a smart man, he said. Youll work it out.

Lechasseur raised a pistol shaped of his fingers and shot the Doctor through the head. Bang. He laughed then, a laugh that he couldnt help, that poured out of him.

Good, the Doctor purred, leaning forward, his chin on his hands, good.

Lechasseur turned his pistol back into a hand. So what is this all about?

Its simple really. I travel. A few weeks ago I was attacked as I arrived in the East End. Something of mine was stolen by Abraxas, who is in the employ of Mestizer and I have a history with her that goes back a long way. Tonight Im going to go to her, now that shes vulnerable. Ill try to get my property back.

And whats going to happen?

Oh, I can think of ninety-nine different outcomes but only two are likely. She kills me or I kill her. When I say Id kill her I mean with great reluctance and only by allowing her to stumble into her own traps, which is exactly what she says about me.

Abraxas will probably turn against her he has his price, like all mercenaries

thats the way these things tend to go. Therell be a few loose ends, of course.

Lechasseur ran a hand through his hair and asked: Its the blue box, isnt it? The cabinet of light?

Thats right.

Does it belong to you?

Yes. He hummed suddenly. No. No, in the sense that I stole her but that was a long time ago and weve become inseparable. For all I know, she didnt belong to the person I stole her from in the first place. I am the best of all thieves. And sometimes… Sometimes I think that I belong to her, that she stole me, it makes some kind of sense.

Lechasseur smiled wryly but it was time to steer the mock interrogation back to more concrete matters.

What about Walken? How is he involved?

Hes a sideshow he was, I should say. Hes the home team and, once he learned what she was up to, he thought he could take on Mestizer. Im not sure quite what he was hoping to achieve in the long run. Hubris, a dictionary definition case. He leaned forward and buried his pensive face in the steeple of his hands.

He wanted to become you, Lechasseur said. He told me. He thought that if he had your cabinet he would turn into the Doctor. As you say, sick in the head.

I can understand that, the Doctor murmured from behind his hands, but I play me better than anyone.

What about the girl in pink pyjamas? The real Emily?

She was there when I was attacked. She helped me get away but lost her memory. You could call her a witness, if you liked. Shes got all that locked up inside her now.

Sometimes I hate myself.

So, she was just someone in the wrong place at the wrong time?

A witness, the Doctor insisted. He was pulling a sour face, staring at his hands as if they werent truly his. Again, Lechasseur saw his wounds. Like stigmata, they wept silently. He had never seen a flesh-worm, not as the Doctor described, but he suddenly saw the man in front of him as a patchwork of alien fleshes, snapped apart and stitched back into place. Each patch had its own horrors and its own delights. It wouldnt be hard to tap into one of those wounds, sample some of the memory leaking from him. He reached out

vermilion sands a grey tower toppling a girl who is yet to be born alien birdsong and found he was reaching physically, overstretched. He was intoxicated on the heady images, the Doctor was a fresh fountain of time and memory. He felt giddy. He couldnt help himself. He stumbled out of the chair and fell head-first against the Doctor before falling backwards. The Doctor grabbed for him but gravity was faster and he hit the floor.

It was only a second or two before he recovered his senses. He was on his back, his breathing was hard and his hands were clenched into defensive fists. The Doctor was leaning over him and he wasnt a trickster, he wasnt the Devil, he wasnt a hobgoblin. He was a real, flesh-and-blood man with a soft but genuine concern in his sad old eyes.

But he was a man pregnant with worlds.

The tea wasnt that bad? he asked.

You are Mr Sun, Lechasseur whispered, but the Doctor just shook his head. He offered his hand but Lechasseur kept his fists bunched and smiled it away.

I have to go, the Doctor said and stepped out of Lechasseurs line of sight. When he returned, Lechasseur was back on his feet. The Doctor had collected his hat and coat, they seemed to be all he needed, all that he took with him to define himself.

He moved behind the Ferris wheel, so that the slow rotating shadows hid his face.

If you see anything here you like, feel free to take it, the Doctor said, his voice flattened out. The playful notes had gone. One way or another, I wont be back.

I should come with you, Lechasseur said, but the Doctor waved him away.

I want you to stay in London. He looked away pensively, then said: Heres something for you to think about. You love this city, Ive been watching you, I can tell. You probably werent here in the Blitz, when all these broken buildings blossomed overnight. The nights have changed since the end of the war. Its a real quality, I dont simply mean the absence of falling bombs. Think about that. Work out whats changed.

Goodbye, Honoré. He stepped away from the Ferris wheel and was gone.

Lechasseur stood alone while the candles burned down around him. The animating spirit of the room had left with the Doctor. The wheel turned but the toys were just unhaunted old junk, pathetic rather than sinister.

Lechasseur waited for five minutes after the Doctor had gone then he opened his clenched right fist and stared down at the chained key on his palm, the cabinet key that hed slipped out of the Doctors pocket as he fell. He reached for the revolver on the table and weighed it in his hand until he knew the shape of it.

Doctor, he whispered, a promise, pressing the brutal metal barrel against his skin, youre not getting away that easily. I want to know how this ends.

He left Mr Suns toyshop in darkness and set off north, on the trail of the Doctor.

7: THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER

ORB WAS BRIGHT THAT NIGHT, THERE WAS NO FOG AND HER MOONLIGHT TURNED THE

world silver. She had a crisp white face, part-shadowed as if she were distracted away from the Earth. The dark whorls on her surface, which the hunter knew to be thirsty seas of dust, formed a face.

With a kick and a silent breathless whoop, Lechasseur dropped from his precarious foothold on the wall and into the dense bushes below. He kept the revolver clutched to his chest. Branches slashed at him but they softened the fall. He rolled and flattened himself face down on the grey-white earth, the revolver probing the darkness ahead of him. He was in his element.

There had been a moment of doubt, as he stepped out into thin air, a moment when he asked himself: why am I doing this? He was a rational man and wasnt entirely persuaded by his own answers.

I dont trust the Doctor.

I think the Doctor needs my help.

I want to see how this ends.

The Doctor was long gone once hed found his way out of the toyshop. He hadnt come back for his stolen key, so Lechasseur assumed that he either hadnt noticed or that Mestizers goons had caught up with him before he had a chance to turn back. There was a third possibility the Doctor had meant him to take the key, but he dismissed that thought. It left too many variables, too much to chance, even for someone as opaque as the Doctor.

The Doctor had been trying to sideline him. He had drawn Lechasseur into his arcane world, maybe not willingly, but now he wanted to shut him back out. The key was a solid connection to the Doctor and while he had it there was always a way in. It was Lechasseurs lifeline back into the other world. He wore it round his neck, under his shirt, against his skin where it felt warm and icy simultaneously. Once he came off the wall he checked it hadnt come loose.

The fire at the Inferno was fierce red but under control. It had spread to the adjacent buildings and firemen were fighting to contain it. Their faces were coated with ash and sweat, they faded in and out of the smoke and steam like sinewy ghosts.

The Blitz must have been like this… No, maybe not. The heat of the flames was real, as were the cries of the men as they worked to turn back the flames, but this fire was isolated. The skies were empty and unthreatening. Lechasseur wondered whether that was the point of the Doctors riddle, but his gut said no.

When hed adopted London hed been warned that it was liable to burn down from time to time.

The fire had gutted most of the cars at the back of the club and some had popped open like fireworks as the heat reached their petrol tanks, but a couple were still intact. Lechasseur found a sporty yellow number its owner was dead and burning already in the Inferno and drove it away while the police were distracted by the fire. It was a question of touching the right wires together and he saw them instinctively. He remembered the route from his last visit but even so it took an hour for him to reach Mestizers house.

The wall wasnt such a barrier, especially with the car parked up against it, the roof offering a useful step up. He hadnt seen signs of any other intruder-proofing at the house last time, except for the men with guns and he could deal with them.

Mestizer had either captured the Doctor or she hadnt and either way she would be distracted. The big problem he reckoned on was the Big Man. Abraxas was bullet-proof, though at least there was only one of him.

He hoped there was only one of him.

Why am I doing this?

His skin shivered with potential. He felt awake for the first time, fully conscious of the world around. The Doctor had done that to him. Time sensitive. The words didnt sound much, they werent any kind of explanation, but they didnt have to be.

He perceived everything round him sharper and brighter than he had done before. The whole world was interconnected and spread about him. Even if he couldnt see or taste or touch everything it didnt matter, he still saw the threads that bound the world together. Even

the moon looked down on only half the world each night.

Lechasseur was a rational man. The Doctor and Mestizer were not rational people, though Walken might have been in his own cracked way, under his disguise. He was here, Lechasseur decided grudgingly, because a rational man should be present at the end to witness it and make sure it made sense.

I can see a spider patient in her shiny silver web. I can see the bushes sway in the wind around me and before me I can hear the huge thick trees slow-breathing oxygen out into the cold air. There are insects on the earth beneath my feet and there are rabbits huddling in the burrows beneath the earth. There are germs on everything, whole teeming colonies of invisible life. Theres a grass snake writhing towards me but Ill be gone by the time its here. Im immersed in life. Theres my heart pumping a shade too fast under my ribs and I calm it down. Theres the moon overhead and millions Of miles away, so distant that Ill never touch her skin or walk on her surface, and far beyond her there are the stars.

He rose in a crouch and ran for the trees. He half-ran stealthily with the revolver held low and steady in his left hand, his shoes hardly touching the ground. He wouldnt break a twig, if he could help it. When he hit the trees branches whipped at him, but he leapt and ducked and didnt break the rhythm of his movement. The trees crowded out the sky, their huge deformed hands reaching to block out the moon. The gun shimmered again in his hand hed squeeze the trigger three times in the coming minutes, he knew it. The shadows parted, the bright sky opened, the trees broke.

There was a stream beyond the trees and beyond that there was a clean neat lawn with a faint downhill incline, at least two minutes worth of run to the conservatory door, the easiest way inside. He held back at the edge of the trees, scanning the grounds for movement and seeing none, but failing to capture the whole outline of the house with his eyes.

The silhouette bled into the night sky around it. The moonlight made the grass silver but the house was impenetrably black.

Staying low and praying to all the gods-that-never-existed that no one was watching from the invisible windows, the hunter set out in a brisk dash across the lawn. He ran hard, half-expecting the grass blades to grow mouths and scream as he crushed them, anything to alert Mestizer to his presence, but the lawn stayed silent. If anyone saw his

approach they didnt raise the alarm, they stood at their window and did nothing.

He got a stitch then lost it again.

He no longer noticed the cold.

The gun was weightless in his hand. He brought it up to his chest as he reached the conservatory. The door was unlocked and opened outwards. He went inside, into the steaming heat.

Mestizers thugs were at the banks of the artificial pool but they werent waiting for him. They were the two hed met earlier, the fat one and the thin one, and they were too busy amusing themselves to notice Lechasseur approach. They had a long bundle, wrapped up in a black sack. The fat man was up to his waist in the water and held one end of the bundle under the surface, a swollen Baptist priest pushing it down with his two firm effortless hands. The bundle looked shapeless and sodden in the water but enough of it was stretched out on the shore for the second thug to kick at and stomp on. They were a real contrast, the fat man with his still and methodical sadism and the thin one full of twitchy violence.

The fat man pulled the tapered end of the sack out of the water for a moments respite and it began to cough. It had a human head, revealed through the sodden outline of the sack. Lechasseur realised there was someone in there, barely alive, but then the thug pushed the head back below the waterline to sink it.

Lechasseur stepped forward with his stolen revolver raised. He was queasily certain about the sack and its contents. He knew who it was they were drowning.

Emily, he said, helplessly.

Something the Doctor had said popped into his head, but it was the wrong time and the distraction was nearly fatal. The thin goon whirled, quicker than Lechasseur expected, slipping his own gun round to bear on the new target quickly and easily.

Ex-British military, probably a special service, better-trained and more prepared to kill than a typical American infantryman. Lechasseur knew he was dead.

The thin man snarl-grinned and spat an insult at his enemy, wasting his precious advantage. Lechasseur made a neat hole in his chest then

a ragged one in his face.

The thug fell backwards leaving a smear of blood on the air. Lechasseur turned to the other man, who seemed to be obsessed with his drowning; he barely registered Lechasseur or the gun. He pressed the hooded head down as far under the water as he could manage. His hands devoted themselves to the head, squeezing and smashing. A haze of pink surrounded the sack, blood from too many wounds.

Lechasseur could not risk another shot for fear of hitting the sack. So he leapt on the thug, tried to knock him back, but the man pushed him away, laughing. He had a childs snide laugh. His hands were empty now and he turned them towards his attacker. The bundle twitched, bloodied, half floating on the surface and forgotten.

Lechasseur would always find it hard to describe what he felt in those next few seconds. In later life, he would only ever tell one other human being what he did to kill the fat man and his explanations were expressed in flattened listless words. The secret meaning of the fight he kept to himself.

It was an uneven struggle. The fat man was a mountain of flesh but it was all muscle, he was another old soldier. They struggled in the waist-deep water, which dragged Lechasseur back while the fat man parted it smoothly. He giggled in his squeaky boys voice as he drove his fists at Lechasseur, but nothing else about him was crude.

Lechasseur let himself be pounded, he had no choice.

Then he did.

He felt the first line of blood run down his face. He closed his eyes and saw where the next blow would fall. He twisted away from it and his opponent shuddered in the water. Lechasseur spun with all his weight and this time the pressure of the water lent force to his blow. He cut the fat mans legs out from under him and the whale bulk slipped down beneath the surface, roaring.

There will be a time when the Earth is drowned and humanity will be ruled by men like these, bloated supermen whove learned to breathe underwater.

The thug pulled Lechasseur down with him. He was still giggling under the surface, his face fully visible through the clear fluid, his fleshy chin breaking the surface.

His hands clawed at Lechasseurs skin and hair, to pull him down where he couldnt breathe.

Lechasseurs revolver was trained at him, jabbing his exposed face. Lechasseur touched the trigger, felt the kick along his arm and saw the thugs head explode. A red mushroom cloud billowed in the pool from the stump of the neck, the body began its slow fall to the bottom.

Lechasseur took the bagged human bundle from the pool and pulled himself out onto the dry ground. The body was still shuddering faintly and he stripped back the sack to reveal a shattered face.

Sometimes I see whats real. Sometimes I just see my own fears.

It wasnt the girl in pink pyjamas. It was Walken.

The conjuror had lost his poise in the water and the violence that once rippled out of him was gone. His hair was dark and slicked across his face and his skin had turned pale white and bloated. He wasnt quite dead, his lips still sucked air and his eyes were open and flicking, but they were fading. He reached out, a sodden paw pushed against Lechasseurs cheek.

Doctor, he said, pushing the word out of his lungs. You saved me.

Lechasseur looked down on him, saying nothing but letting the mans palm inspect his face. It was something like a last request.

Youre already dead, he said.

Walken rippled, his skin turning golden and thin under the hothouse lights.

I can still… regenerate. She laughed at me… when I said… thats what I wanted… He tried to sit and choked and coughed up water and blood. There was some of the old brittle energy in him, he smiled showing sharp teeth. Its the end…

That was too much for him and he lay flat on his back, glistening with water and mortality.

I always wanted… The last thing he said that Lechasseur heard, to be saved by…

you… Doctor.

Walkens hand slipped down on the floor at his side and lay still.

Lechasseur thought that was it, he was gone. Walkens body trembled but there was no life in it. The exposed face and hands took on an unearthly glow but Lechasseur had seen that before and knew it was the phosphorescent glimmer of the fat in his flesh.

The other two men, the two hed killed, were just dead.

He stepped away from the corpses and the pool and pushed into the interior of the conservatory, towards the house itself. He was soaked up to the ribs and the steaming humidity of the hothouse made him damp and sticky. It suddenly became harder to move stealthily and comfortably. His shoes squelched with every step and he left a trail of dirty water and earth behind him. Hed given away half his bullets. His breakin was about to become a lot harder and more dangerous.

He was surprised by how easy it was.

The door at the back of the conservatory led into a short narrow tiled passage. It was cooler but there was a refreshing blast of warm air as he stepped through that seemed to dry him. The damp weight in his clothes evaporated, the trail dried up behind him, he began to move easily again. He couldnt explain it, not at first and never rationally, but…

…but as he penetrated further into the house he became convinced that he wasnt just moving through space but also through time. Mestizers house, with its baffling decor and many rooms, felt more like a maze than a home. The floor had a downward slope and without being able to help himself, he knew that every step was taking him towards the centre and the bottom of the labyrinth. He was supposed to be a time sensitive but he picked up nothing from his surroundings. The key dragged heavily round his neck. When it moved it swung like the pendulum of a clock. When it touched his skin it itched. He didnt scratch but he imagined it worming into his chest like a parasite. It was leading him, he knew, towards the low point of the house and the dark heart of the past.

Perhaps that had dried him off? Maybe each step toward the centre had rolled back time enough so that he was dry again. It was an imperfect theory when he checked his revolver there were still three empty chambers and he knew that the three men hed left in the conservatory were irrevocably dead.

The walls were pocked with geometric shapes for most of the way. They werent the lurid occult symbols hed seen on the walls of the

Inferno club. They were simple universal symbols, too obvious to have any meaning for him. The walls were sometimes black, sometimes white, sometimes grey, but there was no colour in them. His memories were often monochrome, so it came as a natural conclusion that he was walking into the past.

The house was inhabited but all he saw of the occupants at first were huge angular shadows looming on the walls of distant corridors. He ran after them but never caught sight of their owners. He heard their voices, muttering like sleeptalkers, from rooms on the far side of the wall, but hed never find a door. He caught sight of a group of huddled figures, moving faintly at the end of a corridor. They ignored him. He thought of grabbing the nearest and asking directions but he held back, afraid that hed reach for them and his hand would just pass through thin air.

The first truly solid living creatures he found were monsters.

He walked into a room and found them dressing. There were three of them, each one different, each was being helped into patterned yellow robes with high collars and hoods. The closest to the door was about seven foot tall and spindly with a narrow lizard head on a high tapering neck. Its body was squat and solid. It turned and regarded Lechasseur through yellow cat-like eyes. Next to that, but further back in the red-tinted gloom was something more human and he felt this one was male. It had a hard obsidian skin, truly and deeply black, but it paid the newcomer no attention as it struggled with its robe. It had red eyes smouldering like coals in the hollows of its face. The third, and hardest to make out, made a little ululating shriek and began to harangue him in a sweet voice full of clicks and hums. She had a pasty face with a narrow trunk and she pulled on her robe to cover her body.

The gun swung unthreatening in his left hand. Lechasseur tapped his temple and said: I beg your pardon. He had a smile on his lips when he walked out. He felt excited and oddly calm. Hed recognised the monsters dressers, they were all waitresses from the Inferno, Mestizers hijacked hypnotised army.

Soon after that, he found the Doctor.

One of the passageways opened onto a metal gantry over a well shaft that sank another two storeys below him and rose up to a faraway ceiling. He craned over the edge of the gantry and saw an intense ritual of activity beneath his feet. The floor of the shaft was packed

with machinery, not big industrial engines but compact pillars, consoles and nodules that throbbed with light and heat and energy. They were strung together with cables into one vast complex device that covered the floor and climbed the walls. Each part of the machine whistled and winked light, playing its part in the unfathomable whole. Indistinct human figures with shaved heads and drab coveralls moved among it, like little cogs, or insects caught in the mechanism.

No, not insects. The way they move reminds me of Abraxas.

There was another gantry across the well on the next level down, and the Doctor was standing there. He was right beneath Lechasseurs feet, leaning on the rail with one hand extended holding a flower? Lechasseur couldnt see clearly. Mestizer stood next to him. Their poise was easy, they were both relaxed, though Lechasseur could tell nothing more from the tops of their heads.

This is a very impressive set-up youve got here, the Doctor said.

Mestizer didnt reply in a normal voice, she sang. She had a high strong voice but the words she came out with were a string of gibberish. The Doctor turned to her and showed her his hands and said something Lechasseur couldnt hear, but the woman in black just kept singing. There was a third person on the gantry, Lechasseur couldnt see properly. Abraxas? He leaned forward, risking them spotting him. No, it was too small for Abraxas. He recognised the outfit before the head of hair it was Amber.

She had her arms folded over her handbag, where shed kept her gun.

He couldnt see if the Doctor was a prisoner or if he was in charge of the situation.

The Doctor could take care of himself for now. Lechasseur wanted a closer look at the machine, and a better shot at Mestizer.

What do you hope to achieve with all this? The Doctors voice, contemptuous. Oh, very original. Where is he, by the way? You know, the Big Man. No, I cant imagine hed be trotting at your heels all the time.

Amber stepped forward to slap him but Lechasseur didnt see the rest, already stealing across the gantry to the far side. Then he was through into another corridor and out of sight of the Doctor and his enemy,

though Mestizers atonal banshee-song chased him down the passageway and wouldnt shift from his head.

He took a few more turns downwards to what he hoped would be the working floor of the machine, but the maze twisted deceptively and he found himself somewhere else altogether. It was a low circular antechamber, with passages spoking out from it in all directions. He had a curious sense that this unremarkable room was the low, dead centre of the house. The key scratched against his chest, scrabbling to get loose of the chain. He clapped his hand over it.

In the middle of the room was a tall blue cabinet, property he guessed of the Doctor. It was the box that Abraxas had stolen for Mestizer, the box that Walken had coveted and died for, the box that Emily Blandish had witnessed before it wiped her mind clean. Hed seen them on street corners, there was one a minutes walk from his apartment, though hed never paid it any attention.

POLICE, it said, white letters stencilled above the door, PUBLIC CALL BOX.

Lechasseur had always distrusted the things. There never seemed to be one around when you really needed one. This was the most incongruous hed ever seen, sitting in the middle of the monochrome maze. It was a poor prize to find at the end of the rainbow.

There was a set of narrow dusted-over windows in each door but they were dark, the box was lightless and lifeless.

He pushed at the door. It was locked. He unslung the key from round his neck and slipped it into the lock. It was a whim, it didnt look like they were compatible, but it slid inside easily and turned. He heard tumblers clicking distantly and the door opened a fraction, revealing a sliver of dark. Lechasseur stepped back and walked in a circle round it, hoping to find something unusual. Nothing. It was very disappointing.

Step away from the police box.

He heard Amber cock her small pistol. She was behind him aiming it at the back of his head, probably only three feet away. Shed shoot him before he could make a move. He backed away slowly and watched her as she hoved round between him and the open door.

Its okay, he told her, I wasnt planning to steal it. Im about the only one who doesnt want to, I bet. But her eyes were as shallow as he remembered and she didnt laugh.

You dont even know what it is, she droned. She had Mestizers voice. Youve been making this up as you go along, hanging onto the Doctors coat-tails and not looking where hes going. Hes all appetite. He thinks he flits through the world leaving no waste and no tracks behind him, but he does. Youre stepping in them.

Lechasseur shrugged. He could have grabbed the gun then but he found he couldnt move. His eyes had gone to the part-open door, to the very base of it where the darkness was suddenly broken by a thin line of golden light.

So, now what? he asked.

The explosion came from nearby and it jolted through the room, the shock knocking Amber down. Lechasseur grabbed the police box, held fast, and watched the interior light creep up the height of the door. It was a blinding glow, spilling out of the narrow open line of the cabinet. He flung his arm over his eyes and staggered back.

What have you done? Amber was howling, staring into the light from where shed fallen. What have you done?!

As Lechasseur stumbled back he heard the light, the magnesium hiss of it as it flared up brighter from the door. He risked a glance and saw the police box enveloped in an egg of annihilating whiteness. The halo trembled, ready for another burst, another expansion. It coughed, he fell back through the doorway and watched the light blossom out to fill the entire chamber. He blinked and saw POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX printed black under his lids.

The box wasnt a box, he could see that, even as its silhouette faded from his retina. The box was a disguise for the light. This was its true form. It had swallowed Amber. He could see her shadow rising but she was stripped down to a narrow black blur writhing in the glow. If she was making a sound he couldnt hear it, the speed of light outstripped her voice.

The lightline crept forward. He turned and ran before it could absorb him. There were more blasts, close by and jolting, but he kept his footing. He wasnt sure if hed set off the blasts by opening the box, or if this was something clever the Doctor had done to Mestizers machines. Whatever, it felt like an ending, Mestizers plans vanishing

in a show of sound and fury. His path took him onto the machine floor and the light followed him, eating through the walls. Around him tall metal cones crumbled into nothing as it advanced and the bald slaves, shackled to the machine by the cords of their eyes, sat stoically at their consoles as the light rolled over them and swallowed them whole. It was a voracious thing.

He ran, he ran, he ran. He pelted down the corridors hoping instinct was taking him in the right direction. Pandemonium erupted in the passages around him as all the occupants of the house struggled to make their getaway. No one and no thing tried to stop him or fight him on the way out. He lost the gun, risking a glance back so that he could toss it into the light. Then he turned and ran faster, the light ate the revolver and didnt stop.

He burst out into the conservatory and made for the darkness outside, but even so the light followed him. He ran for the trees, making one long breathless dash of the lawn. Only when hed reached the trees sanctuary did he look back and see that the light was no longer close behind him. It was streaming out of every hole in the house wall, every door and every window and every crack it could find in the façade, but it had stopped its relentless forward roll.

The light flared into a pillar stretching towards the moon. The crazed outline of the house flickered colourfully in the heart of it, then vanished, and finally the light was satiated. The pillar collapsed in on itself, folding down into a single point in a matter of seconds before winking out. Lechasseur coughed cold bloody air out of his lungs then sank down by the trees. He stared out at the stark, blackened empty lawn and shook with a moments laughter. The house was gone, taking everything that had been inside with it. Even the corpses of the men hed killed were gone, though their deaths werent washed away.

The Doctor was gone, and Mestizer.

Hed seen them once, just for one weary moment when hed stopped and turned back to face down the light. He had a clear view straight into the heart of brightness, right back to the police box door. Hed seen them there by the box, silhouetted but not completely swallowed by the glare around them. They had been locked together, struggling he thought, or dancing. He watched them wheel round one another, their limbs interwoven, their hands pushing and pulling at their opponents body. The Doctors hat had been knocked off and went tumbling into oblivion. Mestizers hair streamed round her crown. They moved silently in front of the lightgiving box.

Lechasseur hadnt looked back after that. He wondered which of the two, if either, had won the fight.

Does it matter? Its over.

He slumped by the trees for half an hour, holding his head in his hands and laughing to himself. The house was gone. How could a house just vanish like that? It didnt seem possible. He was no longer hurting, the pain had washed away in the darkness, but there was a lingering ache in his limbs. He could fall asleep right here, right now, and not wake up until this time next week. He felt his eyes flutter shut.

The Doctor said: Therell be a few loose ends, of course. And the Doctor said: Youre a smart man. Youll work it out. And Lechasseur stepped forward, with his revolver raised, and said: Emily.

Lechasseur was awake, back on his feet, running for the wall, running for the car, running harder than he had ever done before. The light was gone and there was only darkness at his back.

8: WITNESS

I AM A CYPHER, CLEAN AND BLANK, TABULA RASA.

Spitalfields scarred white church has a blasphemous new gargoyle. It hunches on a narrow perch, casting its gaze left to right across the horizon. Its leathery snout twitches, teasing out a single human scent from a city of teeming millions. It finds a trace, quicksilver thoughts echo in the bowl of its skull. It swings off its perch and leaps. It remembers being a man, and as it bounds from rooftop to rooftop, it thrills with boyish pleasure.

The woman on the railway tracks, so quirky-faced and fresh you might mistake her for a girl. The skies drizzle on her, her stolen coat whips in the wind and shes got nothing warm under that. She has hair full of rainwater and a head full of misery.

Shes just learned who she once was. She keeps her name stuck in her throat though for the past week shes wanted nothing more than to bellow it at the top of her voice and tell the world who she is.

The fixer hunches forward in the front seat of his borrowed car, hurrying to meet an urgent appointment. Hes too far off, he might as well be on the moon for all the good he could do. He bangs on the stolen steering wheel but that doesnt make it go any faster. He knows, at last, exactly what the Doctor hired him to do. Spread before him London is sparkling, a city that never sleeps with an electric nimbus lighting the sky.

Hes guessed the answer to the Doctors riddle, the difference between the city at war and at peace. It was blacked out during the Blitz. Tonight, London is full of light.

More than once, the girl in pink pyjamas had been tempted to stand outside the guest house and scream her name at passers-by. Shed creep down the stairs quietly so as not to disturb Mrs Beardsley and crouch by the front door building up the courage to reach for the latch and pull it open. She warmed up slowly like a television set

Mrs Beardsley was thinking about getting one in time for the next Olympics, now she could afford it and one day maybe shed warm up enough to step outside and shout Im Emily Blandish! Im Emily Blandish! at the world.

She doubted the world would care. It didnt mean anything, the name. It didnt connect to anything in her head. Shed lied about some of the things she could remember. There were glimpses in her mind from the time before the crowd had found her at the market, from after the moment when the light had welled up to obliterate all that shed ever been. She was running, she remembered that clearly, pulled through the alleys of East London by the man in black. Behind them beat the batwings of their pursuers. Her companion threw compulsive glances over his shoulder. Theyre gaining! he shouted.

She remembered his face but didnt know his name. He looked half-wise and full of quiet desperation. When she couldnt run any more, he pulled her aside and told her they would have to split up. Its me they want, he said. Theyll let you go. They wont even notice you.

His eyes were frosted and unconvinced. He looked afraid but she trusted him. Will I see you again? she asked.

Her friend nodded. At least twice. Then he was gone.

She hadnt told anyone about that. She hadnt even told Lechasseur, the miraculous black man whod come to restore her name. She hoped he would return but he never had, frightened away by her landladys brother. The evening after his visit, Mrs Beardsley had sat her down and made her repeat lies about Lechasseur again and again under threat of being abandoned on the street until she almost believed what she was saying. Fewer people were coming to the house to see the celebrity, the stream of visitors was drying up.

Mrs Beardsley had a face like a stone toad ornament and she could probably read minds. Shed taken to locking the front door and hiding the key. The customs of these people were unfathomable.

That morning another man had come to visit Emily and brought flowers. Hed said she was pretty and asked to take photographs. Then he became aggressive and unpleasant so she threw the flowers in his face and pushed him out of her door. There was no lock but she pushed the chair under it and sat quivering on the bed while her visitor

then Mrs Beardsley herself pounded outside and called her names. The visitor had dropped his camera she opened it and pulled out the film, trying to see her face frozen in the grey perforated strip.

That evening Mrs Beardsley drew an ice cold bath for her and sluiced her hair with bitter freezing jugfuls when she complained. The cold

stung, worse than the soap, but it made her bolder. She fixed her landlady with a serious glare and asked whether it was true what Lechasseur had said about newspaper money. Mrs Beardsley had taken her dirty neck and pushed her down under the water to drown her for a minute.

She opened her mouth and swallowed dirty water. There was nothing in her lungs and she wasnt in the bath but the river, pulled down into the lower depths of the Thames. Londoners would find her corpse years later, her flesh eroded away but her hair rippling towards the bright surface like pond weed. Then the airless hallucination got stranger, she was a man being held down by his enemies. Lechasseur appeared, a gun in his hand, ready to pull her out and save her.

That was just a dream. Mrs Beardsley lifted her out leaving her blinded and choking.

There was Thames scum floating on the chill surface of the water. The bathroom was unheated and Mrs Beardsley left her alone with a scrappy grey towel to dry herself, while she went down to listen to the wireless. The girl dried herself and scrabbled down to sit by the fire but her landlady had blocked the sitting room door with an armchair and the rest of the house was cold as the night.

She found her pink pyjamas and slipped them back on. While the radio voice hissed and barked its secret instructions to her landlady, she stole into the understair cupboard and took a coat and a pair of shoes, both too big for her. The strength shed honed inside herself to call out her name now sharpened deepened into a desire for escape. She needed to break out of the house, burst through the prison walls and run into the night. The front door was locked but the back wasnt, why should it be? It opened onto a garden scrub and a low wood fence, beyond which the trains would rattle on their way to the docks.

Lechasseur had told her to get out along the rails. He hadnt realised, not then, quite what she needed to escape from. The fence was runged like a ladder, she clambered over it in her outsize shoes and skidded down the bank on the other side.

The lines were dark in both directions shed hear and see the trains as they rolled by and didnt feel she was in any danger. Behind her the cosy little guest house was darkened, no light escaping from its windows and Mrs Beardsley would be listening to her sainted Light Programme for the rest of the evening. So which way now?

Emily Blandish walked south towards the Thames.

Emily Blandish it didnt mean anything to her. She could shout it all she liked but it wasnt going to bring her self back. The real Emily lurked under the surface, itchy but unreachable. She felt blank and unknowable. Why did she have to be anyone?

Emily Blandish was just an easier sound on the tongue than the girl in pink pyjamas.

Ahead of her, the brown metal tracks and slats were fused into the landscape, into the cut-away earth. Signals glinted in the dark but there were no lights on the track ahead and no trains looming out to run her down. She moved cautiously down the sleepers, brushing against the weeds and mudbanks that clustered by the rail. The clouds gathered and opened within a minute of her escape from the house and they turned the earth into a thick black sludge that got into her shoes until, finally, she had to kick them off and go on barefoot.

Honestly, Mrs Beardsley said, youll catch your death.

Shed left her scrapbook behind, her own little history of the last few weeks. As the rain drove harder she considered turning round and going back for it, but that wouldnt be right. It was a catalogue of the life shed left behind. There was so much outside the house to explore, she would never go back, she would lose herself in London.

There was a man waiting further down the track. The storm blasted around him but he wore a heavy coat, probably a signalman kitted out for the weather. At first she thought he was a soldier, still stranded waiting for the train to take him to war, but she shook that thought out of her head. It reminded her too much of her old landladys brother, still brimming over with unspent violence. The figure turned and gave her a slow wave. He had a thick brown trunk of an arm. He was a tall man and there was a great bulk under his coat.

Emily span on her heels and ran back up the track, hard as she could. Her feet squelched and slipped in the mud. Behind her, she heard the Big Man coming, his legs taking long leisurely strides toward her. His coat flapped in the breeze, the beat of batwings. He caught up in seconds and leapt at her with a joyous whoop resonating from the buzzing radio of his throat.

She threw herself down in the mud and rolled out of the way. The Big Man overshot her, she saw him dart overhead in a graceful swing that belied his hugeness. She caught a glimpse of a compact head, round

and grooved like a football. He splashed down in the mud beside her and when she looked up at him she saw goggle-gasmask eyes and a rubbery insect-mandible nose swinging to face her.

She didnt scream. It occurred to her that shed seen and forgotten stranger things.

Who are you? (Her voice was trembling, stop shaking!) What do you want?

I am Abraxas

I have come to cut open your skull and spew acid on your brains

His hands moved for her he stank of oil and musty dinosaur hide but she rolled out of the way, back onto her feet and across the tracks. They were humming with the song of an oncoming engine why now? Of all times, why now?! She ran on. This Abraxas, whatever it was, meant to kill her anyway. At least being struck by a train would be impersonal and ordinary. And perhaps it wouldnt even hurt. She couldnt tell which way it was coming from but its hollering bell clanged louder and louder until she was convinced it was all in her head.

Bells mean death. Bells always mean death.

Over her shoulder she saw Abraxas padding lazily towards her.

Then the train roared across the far track and slammed him away.

Lucky, lucky, lucky. She skittered across the tracks towards the far fence and scaled it, splinters scratching and pricking her feet on the way, though she didnt care.

She leapt down, hurting but still running, onto scorched black scrubland. Mud stank on her coat and her skin but there was a worse smell up ahead, sewage stunk out by chemicals. She ran towards the stench, between broken columns of toppled stone.

Abraxas eyes couldnt be that sharp, maybe he was hunting through scent.

Anything was worth a try.

Fires flickered amid the stones, against the rain. Theyd made camps here, the derelicts and the dispossessed-by-war. She heard old men

singing old soldiers songs, one mans croaking voice coming loud and sweet out of the darkness. Coarse and broken, unlike anything ever to be heard on the BBC, it was still passionate and human. They will come back, he sang, oh yes, they will come back, the dead will rise from their muddy graves to build the promised land, but they have already lost, the future will betray them and tear down their dreams.

The lament broke off into a long scream of alcoholic horror and she knew her pursuer must be close behind. The drunk wouldnt sing again for the rest of the evening

hed lie in his dry stone niche, howling fitfully at the horror hed seen. Emily shot a glance over her shoulder and saw Abraxas taking silent flea-hops through the air.

He bounded across the scrub towards her, and all around the tramps were dousing their fires and chancing the pneumonic cold for fear of being seen.

Emily kept running forward, fighting the pain in her feet and her legs. Her lungs were shredding cold air and there was a crease of pain in her stomach. She kept moving. She broke over a ridge and stumbled down towards the docks and the river, both still alive with night-time London bustle. The Surreyside bank was shimmering with light, diffused through the sheen of rain. She ran towards it but lost her footing and tumbled down the ridge, landing painfully on her back. There was another drop alongside her, into a channel filled with dark, slick water. A pipe outlet jutted further up the bank feeding the channel with a steady flow. It went straight down to the Thames.

Abraxas reached the top of the ridge and stared down at her.

Youre the last witness, you know?

I wouldnt do this for just anyone

The car came at Abraxas from the side, taking them both by surprise. Emily saw the two beams pass across him, picking out the smooth leathery detail of his body, and that was the only warning before the car ploughed into him and carried him screeching further down the bank. Locked together, Abraxas and the machine tumbled and rolled and skidded to a halt a good fifty feet away, tottering on the edge of the channel.

Lechasseur had jumped clear of the door just before the car struck. He took quick sure steps down the bankside, all the while gazing

frustrated at the burning metal wreck as the pinned but unhurt Abraxas heaved it aside.

He pushed his hand out to Emily. She took it and he pulled her up.

I should have been here earlier, he apologised. Its what the Doctor wanted.

Abraxas!

Lechasseur made Emily crouch down behind him. She looked tough and wiry enough when she needed to be and shed given Abraxas a better runaround than he could hope for, but she was also exhausted and shivering cold. Her feet were naked and bloody with cuts from her getaway. If he could keep her alive hed take her to Mrs Bag-of-Bones

for the rest she needed. That was assuming Abraxas didnt snap her neck the moment he got near her.

He hoped he could talk him out of it.

Abraxas! he shouted. The Big Man had flung most of the burning metal aside and was staggering to his feet. He looked damaged, but not badly enough to make a difference.

He stabbed an accusing finger at Lechasseur.

You were warned and now I will cut you apart and pickle the remains in a jar You were warned Shut up! Lechasseur spat. Mestizer is…

gone. I dont know if shes dead or alive, but shes gone. The Doctors gone too.

Its over. You dont have to do anything else. You can go!

Abraxas shuffled his weight from one foot to the other. His mask betrayed nothing, but maybe he was considering.

You dont understand she is the loose end I have to cut off

You too now, I have my orders from Mestizer

I am a soldier

Yeah, so what? You dont have to follow orders all your life. Even when they matter, you can still say no! Mestizer pays well and whats

it to you? Lechasseur breathed deep and said: I have orders too. From the Doctor.

There was more than that, of course, but he knew now that from the moment hed entered the café to meet the false Emily, the dead unsaved Emily, that he would end up here in front of Abraxas. Whatever else the Doctor might have wanted or done, at heart he needed someone who could be here when he was gone, taking care of the loose ends he couldnt.

I might be wrong, but it feels like the right thing.

Abraxas laughed, a faint babyish sound from his crackling voicebox. The Doctor is a cheapskate! he cried, and sprang forward to attack.

And Lechasseur could see Abraxas, he could see all of Abraxas. He saw the worm of his history spreading back and contorting through the burning wreck, stretched thin back up the slope from when hed been thrown, then twirling through the air back to the railway line and beyond. His attack seemed stifled, inching forward like a fast-cranked film through sticky unyielding time.

Lechasseur had tracked the pink pyjama girl from the house this way, following the Emilyworm through space and through time. It hurt his eyes. He felt the pressure build behind them, inside them, almost enough to detonate them in their sockets, but if he concentrated hard and urgently enough he could see the world unfold in four dimensions.

Abraxas came at him, a beautiful brown leather snake with infinite arms. The suit, he saw, was keeping him alive. It was riddled with pins, plugged through the layers of armour and the atrophying skin within. An orange fluid that was not blood ran in his veins and machines throbbed in his chest where the heart, the lungs, the stomach should have been. His leather skin was oily, flayed from the backs of creatures that no longer walked the Earth.

He was moving fast, though it looked languid. Lechasseur pulled Emily aside before the Big Man could crash into them. Her skin whispered to him of amnesia, a layer that had built around her as insulation against a violent and incomprehensible world. It was a thin layer, it would peel off easily if they survived.

And for the first time, he thought that they might.

He pulled Abraxas out of his attack and tried to fling him onto the

ground. Even with time on his side that was impossible. Abraxas balance was too good, he was too strong, but Lechasseur gouged a hole in the stitches of his armour as he tried.

Abraxas howled and battered him away, skidding sideways to rest on the bank.

You hurt me? It was almost a plea.

Abraxas reached for him and missed. Lechasseur saw where his fists would be, moments before they made contact. He wove a cats cradle between them.

Abraxas wobbled but regained his footing. Lechasseur was on him, pounding and tearing with all the strength he could muster. Abraxas hands clamped round the back of his neck and for a second he couldnt breathe then the electric voice moaned and the fingers let him loose. He heard the crump of metal on metal, looked round with bloody red eyes and saw Emily beating the Big Man on the back with a metal bar shed pulled from the car wreck. She managed another swing but Abraxas snatched the bar out of the air and snapped it in his fist.

Her momentum lost, Emily skidded back onto the ground and lay still.

Stay down, please stay down.

Had it been like this in the war? He couldnt remember. Hed never seen the enemy so close. Abraxas was right up against him, their limbs were tangling and he could feel air being pumped from his face by the machines inside. Death in Belgium had come invisibly by sniper fire or pianos laced with dynamite, not so brutal, not so physical. He ducked Abraxas next two grabs, seeing them before they came.

There was a weak spot on the Big Mans midriff, where hed torn his first hole. He made a claw of his hand and rammed it hard into the wound.

Abraxas screamed. He had three voices and they all screamed.

The first was the electric voice. Lechasseurs fingers found wires in the hole and as he popped them the humming galvanic pitch wobbled violently, turning into a hard high screech-tone, then grinding down into harsh static.

The second was his whole voice, flickering through the worm of his life. It wasnt so much a scream as a gasp of air with a near

imperceptible squeak at its heart. The past-time segments of Abraxas were fixed but they all moaned to themselves now and forever under their breaths.

The third voice was human and came from Abraxas gut and from a ragged hole in the flesh and bone under his tight leather mask. It was the worst thing Lechasseur had ever heard and he had to step back. By the bank, Emily shook her head and coughed out phlegm and thin vomit as the sound went through her body.

Abraxas gloves fastened on Lechasseurs shoulders and pulled him close but the Big Man was dying. He sank to his knees, his mass dragging Lechasseur down into a kneeling hug in the churned mud and the rain.

I was a soldier like you he confessed

I know, Lechasseur told him, because he had seen it when his fingers met flesh in the hole hed torn. Hed seen the little blond boy arrange his painted lead soldiers in ranks on the table in his bedroom, then the lead went through him at Passchendaele, shredding his body. The boy lay on a barbed-wire bed and sobbed blood, Christ-wounds. The angels, when they came, had chrome faces, they unstrung the dirty metal hooks and fitted clean replacements. The blond boy was in his dorm at school, a leader of men who saw nothing but suffering in the walls, writing poetry because he thought it could redeem him though he had nothing to say. He kissed a girl whose name he forgot, he looked at Emily through glass eyes and wondered if she was maybe the forgotten girls daughter though all human women looked the same to him now. Mestizer looked at him with her grease-paint face then he had seized the Doctor by the head and pinned him to a mushroom-shaped pedestal in a room of light, and the Doctor looked like Mestizer, a man in an ill-fitting mask. He was Abraxas and he was the boy laughing at a dirty joke then he was in a butcher-stink uniform while all round him humans and horses were transformed into blooms of gristle and excrement and all he could think to say was

I need a doctor I need a doctor I need a doctor

Yeah, Lechasseur agreed. His tears were like blood on his face. Abraxas voice broke down into gibberish and then went silent, so Lechasseur eased himself out of the dead grip allowing the body to slip forward into the mud.

Emily was shaking and crying and so was he.

Ive been warned against turning bitter and cynical, Lechasseur reflected. Hed found a stone pressed into the earth, out-of-place in such soggy ground. It was smooth-flat and looked orange in the night lights. He imagined it being lodged in Abraxas brain, shaken loose like a seed when the body died. He flipped it across the channel of water but it didnt skim.

Emily Blandish sprawled beside him on the bank with her bare pallid feet resting lightly on his knees. Hed checked them for splinters, an impossible task in the dark, and rubbed off some of the dirt. She had tiny weightless feet with toes pushed narrow together. She was probably bruised all over so was he, but hed heal.

Was it the Doctor? she asked. Who warned you? He made a nod.

I think I do remember him. Not very clearly, she admitted. Im sorry. I didnt mean to hold anything back from you, the first time we met. I couldnt have told you much.

It doesnt matter. Im not looking for him any more. He set her feet back down on the ground. He wanted me to find you. He wanted me to protect you, once he was gone.

Though Im not completely sure of that, he was kind of elusive.

I know what you mean.

You really do remember him?

He couldnt tell if she was nodding or shaking her head. I remember someone. I dont know if it was the Doctor, the real Doctor. It could have been anyone really.

Lechasseur couldnt think of a helpful reply but sat staring at his hands. There was blood on the open palms, blood and a sickly ooze that smelt like oil but wasnt.

Abraxas humour, it tingled his hands, dissolving in the rain. Im melting, Im melting.

Emily piped: How does he manage it?

What?

How is it that the Doctor isnt bitter and cynical?

He is. Ive met him. Lechasseur sighed. But he said it was something to

do with…

I dont know what youd call it. Companionship?

Friendship?

Yeah. He nodded.

The rain drizzled away and a heavy mist rose quickly from the damp earth and the Thames. The south bank lights were already skinned over by green fog. Emily was sweating despite the cold. Lechasseur had pulled Abraxas heavy cape from the body and draped it over her shoulders. She looked frail in its tent-size folds, as vulnerable and defiant as a day-old baby. Shed survive. She was tough.

The Doctors gone, he repeated. I dont know where.

Hell be back.

Lechasseur nodded. He stepped down the bank to crouch by the body. Abraxas lay snout-down in the mud. Lechasseur had considered calling the police but Emily shrank away from that. She didnt want to return to the Beardsley house and anonymous celebrity.

Besides, Lechasseur had lost track of the number of laws hed broken that night, including thou shalt not kill. No, a water burial was the easiest option. The stream would carry the body down to the Thames and from there he might float all the way to the sea.

Lechasseur turned to Emily and said: I cant do this on my own.

He could barely touch the thing hed killed, it was still twitching with remembered mechanical life. His fingers went for the leathery mask then drew back. He couldnt bear to see the skull beneath the skin. Emily moved off the bank to help him roll Abraxas into the channel. He was surprisingly light. He dropped into the water with a dull splash, sank into the grime then bobbed up as the current delivered him to the Thames.

They stood together, watching him go. Lechasseur could still see the wounds on Emilys face and his own wounds reflected back at him on her eyes. He blinked and watched her worm-segments ripple back through time to the moment when shed stepped out into Spitalfields market. Before that she tapered into nothing, she was newborn and the Doctor had delivered her.

Their hands were held together, a joint fist of interlocking fingers.

Can you see them? Emily asked. She was thinking of the Doctor, he could sense it through her skin. Shed cast her gaze back up the bank but when Lechasseur turned to look there was no one there but the shambling old men of the shore. They looked down at the companions, curious spectators, their faces smudged and illegible, their costumes once gaudy but now frayed. Lechasseur thought he heard faint voices caught on the wind from above, but he couldnt hear what they were saying. No, it was birdsong, the shrieks of seagulls wheeling in an alien sky. And Emily, no longer thinking about the Doctor, turned back to face the river.

Emily Blandish and Honoré Lechasseur didnt move from the bank but clung together until they were sure that Abraxass body was gone. Lechasseur was tired and he felt Emilys weariness in the weight resting on his arm. On the river monsters moaned in foghorn voices and their huge lumbering silhouettes slid by in the murk. Abraxas bobbed down to join them. They waited until the speck of his body was enveloped by the fog, then Lechasseur and Emily walked off the bank and were swallowed up themselves, at least until the morning.

Out there in London, the future was waiting for them.

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